

The Way I Carry On by InkandOwl

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Relationships: Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Mike Hanlon, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

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Summary:

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“No,” Richie snorts, “But you gotta look like a rock star, man. You’re the guitarist, you’re in charge of at least 65% of our sex appeal.”

Eddie makes a strange ritual of getting his seatbelt on, gripping the steering wheel with his anxiety grip. There's a beat of silence and then, “What?”

“Wear your black polo shirt, it’s the spiciest thing you own.”

“Richie. *What?*”

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Garage Band AU where they both pine and Eddie has an identity crisis

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I should've known that I would end up writing Stephen King fanfiction one day, it was inevitable.

Title is from the song &Run by Sir Sly

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Richie presses down on the sound board and laughs wildly when it makes a terrible BWAHHHH noise. Mike's talking about booking a gig at the Loser's Club and Richie makes a point to release another wave of stupid noises every time he opens his mouth.

"Dude, shut up." Eddie mutters quietly, swatting at Richie's knee but keeping his eyes on Mike. His guitar is balanced carefully across his lap, palm held over the strings to keep it muted.

Richie glances at Mike and grins, "Sorry. Sorry, man." He holds up a hand and Mike just nods kindly.

"No problem, Rich, I—"

BWAHHHHH

"Richie!" Eddie's dark eyebrows are pulled together in annoyance but Richie is laughing too hard to heft any sort of clever quip at him. Even Mike laughs. Behind him on the couch, Beverly extends her leg so that she can press her bare foot against the side of Richie's face, curling her toes. It's foul and reduces Richie to manic giggling.

"I'm sorry—" Richie says, entirely unapologetically, "I'm sorry, I'm listening now I just got distracted." He holds up his hand. His bass guitar is balanced precariously against the couch and Beverly makes a point to grab the neck of it before she's leaning forward and saying

"Richie Tozier? *Distracted*? Why I never." She presses her free hand to her chest and Richie spins around quickly to kiss her on the cheek multiple times.

There's a real fondness that Richie feels for Bev. Something about growing up as *those kids* in their home town. The two problem kids that other parents would see wandering down the street and press their mouths into thin, disapproving lines. Faces severe as if to say, 'I would never let my children around Marsh and Tozier— Not while I still live, breathe and pay bills.'

She's beautiful and smart and hilarious, and her voice sounds crunchy and raw when she sings. She's a whole goddamn Rockstar. Bev pats Richie's face, "Focus, Trashmouth."

"How can I when I have clowns to the left of me—" He gestures to Mike, "Jokers to the right—" To Eddie—

Eddie who becomes genuinely irate then, "Richie! Shut. The. Fuck. Up!" He grabs a throw pillow off of the ground where he's sitting and moves quickly to start smother Richie with it. At nineteen, Eddie is still on the short and slender side, but he's five feet seven inches of tightly coiled fury and deft fingers that know exactly which spots on Richie's ribcage makes him laugh so hard he chokes.

Underneath the furious ministrations of Eddie's hands, face smashed sideways into the dirty carpet rolled out on Mike's basement floor, Richie thinks he might like to die this way. Especially when Eddie straddles his hips, leans in close and whispers fiercely in his ear, "Not another word out of you, Trashmouth, or I'll bite you."

Richie lets out a hitched breath and smiles, "Promise?"

Eddie's eyes are fiery and wide— a live wire hidden behind a deep brown puppy dog sadness. He doesn't answer, just grips Richie's jaw roughly and gets close enough that the tips of their noses touch, before shoving his face away.

"Not to further break up our happy home, but we still have practice." Mike yawns, as if this is all beneath him. It is, but Eddie gets up and retrieves his beloved Les Paul guitar. A traditional Pro V that he keeps in a temperature controlled room when he's not playing it.

"Strange mating ritual." Bev mutters, red hair hanging over Richie's face like a curtain and tickling his cheeks.

Richie grins wildly up at her and winks.

She's known that Richie's been in love with Eddie since they were thirteen years old and puberty had absolutely rocked his shit. Equal parts terrified, elated, and belligerently horny in the grips of teenage hormones. Sometimes he thinks Mike knows too. Possibly also Stan. Definitely also Stan.

Stan knows everything and he doesn't quite enter Mike's basement as forms as a corporal specter in the doorway. "I have it on good authority that we're getting the largest merch table at the Loser's Club next weekend." Stan's fingers move deftly over the buttons of his cardigan. Middle button first so that he can work out.

"Who's good authority?" Richie props himself up on his elbows to look at him.

"Me." Stan quirks one of his thin eyebrows at him, "If you want any changes done to the EP, tell me now, I only have so many days to press the album."

Richie's eyes move slowly over the frames of his glasses to meet Eddie's and mouth, "Press the album" with a pretentious look on his face.

Eddie bites back a smile, but a laugh bubbles out of him and he turns it into a hacking cough. "You are neither clever, nor subtle, Kaspbrak." Stan shouldn't be so intimidating while wearing a cardigan, but here he is. He looks at Richie, "My standards for you are already subterranean, Tozier."

He keeps his lips pressed to a firm line, eyes locked onto Richie for a solid twenty seconds with no emotion before a grin breaks out across his face. It makes Richie laugh loudly to see Stan this way. "Stanley the Manley, did you bring your triangle to practice? You know the ladies love a good percussionist. Just look at Mike over here—absolutely swimming in—" Richie has sunk so far down the side of the couch that he's now lying entirely horizontal on the floor. He lolls his head to the side to openly study Mike, seated carefully at his computer desk with his drumsticks folded in his lap, "Mikey, baby, what is it you want to be swimming in?"

Truth be told, he's never seen Mike with anyone in a way that would suggest *romantic possibility*.

"Endless record deals would be nice." Mike lifts a drum stick and points it directly at Richie's face, the tip of it so narrowed down his vision that it makes Richie go cross eyed. "Stan, give us the logistics."

Stan launches into the professional sounding shit. The business end of being in a band, which is an all out joke to Richie, considering they're fresh out of high school, mostly playing local bars and making next to no profit. Mike and Eddie hang on every word, interested in all of the numbers and talk about merchandising and equipment. Richie pulls himself up onto the couch next to Beverly though and rolls his eyes, "We should blow this popsicle stand."

"What is this, an after hours special?" She runs her fingers through the thick mass of dark brown curls on his head, nails scratching pleasantly over his scalp. He leans into it and nearly purrs at the attention, until Bev curls her fingers and pulls his hair with a sharp tug that makes him cry out in pain.

"I thought we were having a moment." Richie whimpers sadly against her shoulder.

Bev just pats his head and hums.

Band practice stays a strange business meeting for another forty five minutes before they all decide to go home. Or, Eddie has to make it to his shift at the coffee shop, and they don't really want to keep piddling through their cover songs anymore without a guitarist. "Do you need a ride home, Rich?" Eddie tucks his guitar into the soft body case that he slings over his shoulder, tilting his head to the side.

He's been letting his hair grow out a bit from the repressed business man look his mom always forced on him as a child. Now pieces of it fall over his eyebrows, a little more wild, but in a careful way that is very *Eddie*. Richie's fingers itch with the need to mess it up properly. "Don't you need to get your uniform anyways?" They live together.

The day Eddie had turned eighteen, in fact— skipping over the threshold of Sonia Kaspbrak's suburban hidey hole where she had

cried out after her son. Pleading, crocodile tears, and then a glare leveled at Richie with her face red and furious. “This is your fault, Tozier! I always knew you would *infect* him. Depraved.”

‘Depraved indeed’, Richie had thought, blowing a kiss at Sonia from over the roof of his beater of a Civic, ‘If only you knew the half of the depraved shit I think about doing to your sweet Eddie Bear on a day to day basis.’ He hadn’t said that though. For once, Trashmouth Tozier’s trash mouth was silent out of self-preservation. He had waved instead and yelled back, “I’ll take good care of him!”

Eddie had swung the passenger door shut and turned to him— Eyes wide and cheeks flushed, dimples on full display as he had pressed his hands to the dashboard and said, “Richie, drive!”

Who was Richie to ever deny Eddie anything?

“I have my uniform in my car.” Eddie folds his arms over his chest, lips pressed in a thin line.

“It’s probably going to smell really stale now.” Richie tells him.

“Richie.” Beverly warns.

“I don’t think you washed your apron with your organic woo woo shit detergent either, what if you break out in hives on your dick?”

Mike snorts and covers his mouth with his hand and after a moment it seems to sink in for Beverly too. She giggles a little manically. “Fine, fucking walk. Maybe you can use your bass for firewood when you inevitably end up in a fucking ditch at the bottom of a hill because you don’t pay attention to your surroundings.”

The way he lobbies his words at Richie, full of quick annoyance makes Richie’s chest ache in the most wonderful way. He wants to kiss that pissed off little line forming between Eddie’s eyebrows. “Eds, I don’t know how to start a fire.”

Eddie clenches his fists and slams them down at his sides, looking up at the ceiling and taking a comically loud breath. Richie could probably get one more comment in there and Eddie would absolutely spiral. He considers the payoff. There’s a good chance that a

meltdown would send Eddie launching himself onto Richie, and then he would get a little bit of physical contact in.

Even if it is brought in a slurry of aggravated tussling.

Richie is sick. He knows.

“Get in the car.” Eddie grits out.

Bev and Mike are inconsolable at this point— desperate wails of laughter spilling from behind their fingers and Richie purses his lips, “Ohhh, I’m in trouble, comrades.” He says lowly in a Russian accent. He pushes himself onto feet, hefting his bass up by the neck.

Stan tracks the movement with serious eyes and shakes his head, “The two of you are disgusting. Maybe consider the fact that we don’t want to be subject to your weird exhibitionist foreplay.”

Eddie is already halfway up Mike’s basement stairs, so he hasn’t heard Stan’s damning comment, but Richie takes too long to school the stupid look on his face. He feels raw and exposed. He grins.

“Oh, but Staniel, it’s the only action I’m getting these days.”

Still to real, Tozier, reign it in.

“Rich—” Bev says it quietly before he can slide a ‘your mom’ joke in there.

“Bye, bye, bye! I’ll be sure to write once papa settles us into the new family manor!” He flops his hand about in an exaggerated wave, lips pouted to accommodate the strange southern lilt he’s adopted. There’s a chorus of “Bye, Richie!” from the rest of them and Richie slips the strap across his shoulder so that he can jog up the stairs to Eddie.

By the time he’s joined him at the front door— Eddie slipping his feet back into his immaculately clean adidas, he seems less annoyed with Richie already. Not that Richie believes that shit was real for even a second.

Richie shuffles awkwardly to Eddie’s car, because his legs are long

and he tends to *stride* when he's out and about with other people, but with Eddie he wants to stay by his side. "Hey, Eds, what are you wearing to The Loser's Club for the gig?"

Eddie flips through his keys to unlock his car and regards him over the roof, "What do you mean? Is there a dress code or something?"

"No," Richie snorts, "But you gotta look like a rock star, man. You're the guitarist, you're in charge of at least 65% of our sex appeal."

Eddie makes a strange ritual of getting his seatbelt on, gripping the steering wheel with his anxiety grip. There a beat of silence and then, "What?"

"Wear your black polo shirt, it's the spiciest thing you own."

"Richie. *What?*"

He's peripherally aware that Eddie is looking at him now, but Richie presses his feet to the dash and plucks his fingers mutely over the strings of his bass. The neck of it is invading all of Eddie's space, strings hanging off the tuning dials like the uncultured animal he is. "I'm sensing some panic. Are you second guessing your boy scout hair style? Cause, you know, I can fix it for you the day of. Really get my fingers in there and—"

"If you make this a sex joke, I'm going to punch your dick off." Eddie threatens, pushing the bass guitar out of his face.

"Who's making this about sex, Eds?"

"Don't call me that." Eddie points severely at Richie, "I'm not making this about sex, you're the one who— you know what, that's not— Richie, is there something wrong with the way I look?"

Normally this sort of comment would warrant a good roasting from Richie, but the sincerity to Eddie's tone and the way he turns those sad Bambi eyes on him makes Richie stop to actually think about his next words.

Very rare.

Eddie Kaspbrak has always dressed for practicality, comfort, and the possibility that he would have to run from a sudden danger. And yet — everything about him, from his thoughtful features, to his careful hands, to the sensible outfits has always been stupidly hot to Richie. Beautiful even. He has also never cared about what other thought of his looks, which is why Richie presses his glasses up the bridge of his nose and says, “No, I was just teasing. You look fine, very— clean.”

Excellent save.

Eddie turns his face back to the road. Serious and careful.

Richie does a lot of near constant fuck ups. He knows he’s doing them before, and often during said fuck ups. Sometimes though, he does what he calls Accidental Tozier Fumbles™, which happen when he isn’t aware that he’s fucking up at all. This is an ATF and he can feel it. “Eddie, you know I think you look entirely fuckable, right?” It’s perfectly confident, said straight from the chest and Eddie rolls his eyes. Nailed it.

It’s not a lie but Eddie tucks right into it as if it’s a certifiable joke and launches immediately into a tirade. All the tension in the car slides away and Richie laughs as Eddie calls him a greasy hobo. He even throws out the words ‘crust punk’. “I’ll show you crust when you get off work tonight, you can wear that cute little apron.” Richie shimmies his hips in the seat, “Or better yet, that matching pajama set you own. The way that sensible fleur de lis pattern brings out the shithead in your eyes really sends me over the edge.”

Eddie makes a choked off noise like he’s revving up to really cuss Richie out, but instead he devolves into hysterical laughter. His eyes crinkle up in the corners, teeth on full display, and the sound of it settles happily inside of Richie. “You’re not fucking funny.” Eddie says, but there’s tears gathering in Eddie’s eyes from the laughter and his voice breaks when he tries to speak around it.

Richie Tozier has known one thing since he was thirteen years old: He’s in love with Eddie Kaspbrak. He’s twenty years old, sitting in the passenger seat of his best friend’s car on his way home from band practice when he knows this: Keeping that love inside of him is going to kill him, but he’s always been bound for an early grave anyways.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

“Eds, make sure you put extra love into that.” Richie leans over the glass of the hot bar and points down to the empty cup that has now landed on the counter. Richie’s name is written in Georgie’s big chunky script.

“I’m going to spit in it.” Eddie promises, tilting a fresh gallon of whole milk over the steaming pitcher. For someone threatening the most disgusting drink possible, Eddie is meticulous about using the measurements. He even adds an extra scoop of vanilla bean, knowing that Richie will love the sugar overload.

“With love though, right Eds?”

Notes for the Chapter:

An Eddie POV chapter!

Slight content warning for some internalized homophobia (mild, Eddie's struggling more with his personal identity and femininity). It's a theme I want to keep with for the story, because I love movie Eddie and his rabies, but I will first and foremost be a book Eddie man and I want to write in how sensitive and gentle he is. At the same time, I have no want to ever write in violent homophobia or slurs, so the warning is for self reflection and not the more jarring things.

Thank you for reading and for kudos-ing and commenting!! I am definitely going back and replying but I work like 70 hours a week and I get around to these things way late. <333 come say hi to me on tumblr- @inkandowl I also do art on there!

“You still have twelve more minutes on your Oasis timer, Eddie, you really don’t have to—” Ben watches Eddie pour his sanitizer into the sink anyways and presses his mouth into a thin line.

Eddie rings out the old rag and holds it aloft, “There was a bean in it, and it was really murky. People don’t want murky bean water in their lattes.”

Ben is a nice guy. A genuinely nice guy, not one of those assholes that gets mad at girls for not wanting to sleep with him and then declares himself a Nice Guy™ in an angry text rant. He rubs his hand over the back of his neck and inhales deeply, “Lattes are just sort of murky bean water though.”

A clipped laugh comes from the register where Georgie Denbrough is struggling to peel the paper off of a roll of quarters. He glances at Eddie apologetically, then laughs again. It really takes away from the sincerity of it.

Georgie will also be a Ben Hanscom variety of nice guy, but currently he’s just a fifteen year old kid who isn’t allowed to work more than twenty hours a week as per the state of Maine. “I don’t want to explain to you why you’re both disgusting and probably giving our customers shigella.”

“Mmmm, I’ll have an extra shot of shigella in my pumpkin spice latte, Eddie baby.” Richie practically materializes in front of the counter, Beverly at his side.

Ben turns a fantastic shade of red, ignore Richie entirely, and knocks over two tea shakers in the process of saying, “Hey, Bev! I really love your sweater, it’s a great color.”

It’s a hideous shade of pea green with a faded Misfits logo on the front and Eddie would roll his eyes if it weren’t so damn endearing. He squints at Richie instead, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Visiting my best daddy, Mr. Kaspbrak before I hit up the downtown with my baby mama, Ms. Marsh. Aren’t you gonna hook me up with some coffee?” He stops in front of Georgie’s register and at least makes an effort not to look so rabid. It’s hard not to feel protective of

him. “What’s a cinnamon bun flat white, Jorge?” Richie jerks his chin towards the chalkboard behind them with the barista picks.

Georgie glances over his shoulder too, like he’s forgotten that he was the one that wrote it down, “Oh!” He lights up then. Georgie actually thinks Richie is cool. “It’s a flat white with cinnamon and vanilla bean. A lot of people go half and half with the flavoring, but I like it sweet so I do the full thing for it.”

Richie looks him over, all fond, “Give me a cavity, Mistah D.” He tosses a five dollar bill onto the counter. “Keep the change. A little something for the tip jar.”

The tip jar in question is only populated because Ben has grown into something of a heartthrob and Georgie makes old ladies want to pinch his cheeks. Sometimes Eddie gets the change of a sensible business man type that appreciated his down to business attitude at the register and didn’t idle with chit chat. Eddie wraps a fresh towel around the steaming wand and aerates it for a moment, letting the loud hiss drown out all the noise of the coffee shop.

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“With love though, right Eds?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Eddie, Eddie—” Richie taps the lid of the bean hopper “Can you make art in the foam? Can you make a dick? Or a dick with a bow on it?”

Eddie glares up at him through his eyelashes, “Shut the fuck up.” He

practically whispers it because there are actually other guests in the shop.

“Buy my silence.” Richie lifts the lid, promptly steals an espresso bean and pops it in his mouth, loudly telling everyone he needs to take a piss and wandering towards the bathrooms.

“Are you two always like this?” Ben leans back on the counter, tilting his head to study Eddie.

Ben’s had a lot of encounters with Richie now— he practically haunts the coffee shop— but Eddie realizes they’ve never had a real interaction outside of Eddie being at work and Ben having to put on his shift leader face and tell Richie to stop talking about his dick around customers. Eddie flushes a little and shakes his head. “They’re even worse outside of here.” Beverly grins, reaching over the counter for a hot cup, “Can you ring me up for a decaf?”

Ben scrambles away to the counter when Beverly starts pulling out a wad of cash, “Oh, you don’t have to— you can just have it.”

Beverly looks down at the empty cup and then Ben, “Are you sure? You’re not going to get in trouble for your inventory being off or anything like that, are you?”

It’s almost impressive how many words Ben manages to fit into a few seconds when he rambles out, “Yeah it’s totally cool, no one ever gets decaf anyways, I mean we only ever sell like, four cups a day maybe — But it’s fresh! Georgie brewed a new batch only three minutes ago so—”

Eddie shakes the foam out on top of Richie’s latte and glances up at Ben. He throws Eddie a mildly panicked look and Eddie shoots him a brief thumbs up. He’s crushing it, Eddie’s proud of him.

Bev tucks her hair behind her ear and smiles shyly, “Thanks, Ben.” She lifts the cup, “Did Eddie tell you about our gig this weekend?”

Ben fumbles with the strings of his apron, “He did! That’s so exciting, the Loser’s Club!” They fall into an excited conversation and Eddie watches Bev invite Ben while Ben stumbles all over his words in

excitement. It's really sweet and settles a calm over Eddie.

It also makes his chest ache with a longing that he knows exactly where to place, he just doesn't want to.

"How come my drink wasn't free?" Richie asks loudly and Eddie jumps.

"Because I hate you. Did you wash your hands?"

Richie places a cold damp hand over Eddie's, "I didn't, they're wet because I pissed all over them."

He's obviously lying but Eddie flinches anyways. This would most definitely be considered psychological warfare. "Can I come to your show?" Georgie fills a short cup with whipped cream and proceeds to stick his finger in it.

"Only if you got a fake ID or an eighteen year old chaperone." Eddie quirks an eyebrow at him. He's not going to lecture Georgie on the dangers of being underaged at a rock venue— not when his entire life up to this point has consisted of him sneaking in and out of various bedroom windows and letting his friends talk him into slew of awful ideas. Namely Richie.

Definitely not when music felt like the only thing that saved him sometimes.

Everyone feels music differently. That's what Mike always said. Sometimes it's about the rhythm— the way it moves inside of you like a physical wave. It's the way Richie plays, putting his entire body behind the shaking thrum of his bass guitar and the way every hit of the drum pounds at Mike's joints.

Sometimes it's the thought behind it. The way Beverly puzzles together lyrics to a simple riff, knowing that the real fun is her band members building off of that. It's that game of it all.

Sometimes it's the emotion. The overarching need to put all of the happiness and sadness and longing and hurt and *want* behind something that feels like a confession. That's how Eddie does it. With eyes closed and promises that he needs to put somewhere, scattered

over the strings of his guitar and in the feedback of his amp.

Georgie has launched into a spiel about his older brother Bill and how he'll take him to the show because he's the absolute coolest guy in the entire world. He's just about the only teenager that Eddie's ever heard regard his sibling like they're something of a god. Eddie slides Richie's drink over the counter to him, lid securely checked and double checked so that it doesn't burn him. It doesn't matter, in the end, because Richie practically chugs it— 153 degrees and all.

"Can you try savoring something for once in your life." Eddie purses his lips together tightly.

Richie quirks and eyebrow, dark and severe over the thick black frame of his glasses and puts the now half empty flat white down, "I savored the fuck out of your mom last night, by the way this—"

"Richie, fuck!"

"— this is a super good latte. Eds, calm the fuck down." Richie is all stupidly long limbs now and he's ridiculous draping himself over the counter in a zebra print button up shirt, and yet— he looks so effortlessly cool. He wears glasses with frames that are flattering to his face now, still thick rimmed and loud, but an actual style with lenses that are shaved down so he doesn't look like he's staring through the bottoms of coke bottles. Richie's shoulders are getting broad, and his chest, filling out all of his lanky frame, and his hair is an unruly mess of black curls that Eddie wants to bury his fingers in and—

"—right, Eddie?" Beverly's voice cuts right into his prime stare at Richie time and he blinks.

"I—" And everyone is looking at him, "What?"

She gets this look on her face. It's a sort of stare down that isn't borne from anger or disappointment, but just *knowing* something and Eddie feels itchy. Bev doesn't reiterate whatever it was that she said, only smiles kindly at him and holds up her coffee, "We'll be over in the corner. Out of your hair while you're all working hard."

Richie reaches over the counter and promptly ruffles Eddie's said hair up. He snatches his hand back before Eddie can break all the bones in it and laughs, "Cute, so cute. We'll put some flowers on that crown for Saturday night, like you used to do when we were kids. Remember that Eds?"

"You used to put flowers in your hair?" It's not cruel, the way Georgie says it, but there's a hint of taunting in his words, the slightest furrow between his eyebrows like this demands an explanation. It twists in Eddie's chest painfully.

"He did! Forever, too. We went down to the quarry all the time and he would dick around in the grass collecting all the ones with the damaged petals because he thought no one else would love them. Don't let his crusty exterior fool you, he's got a total marshmallow heart."

Beverly laughs, bright and kind, but she joins in with Richie telling stories of Eddie with flowers. With oversized pink sweaters and crying when he first held Mike's new kitten. They're happy to share it all with Eddie's coworkers, who are happy to listen, telling all of it with a fondness. All Eddie feels is shame though. Spreading like shadows in Eddie's blood and he twists the cover off the steaming wand to busy himself with scraping the sides. Anything to distract him from the threat of tears stinging behind his eyes.

His ears are ringing but it doesn't drown out the litany of *soft Eddie Kaspbrak, a girly boy, too sensitive, too small, too emotional, too ga—*

The thin edge of the metal he's using slips against the side of his thumb and he drops it, blood welling up instantly from the cut. "Eds!" Richie reaches over the top of the counter and grabs his wrist gently, "You're gonna have blood flavored lattes now." He jokes, grabbing a wad of napkins with his free hand and pressing them to Eddie's thumb. His eyes are soft and concerned behind his glasses though, "You alright?" Richie says it quietly.

Eddie shakes his head and wrenches his hand free, taking the napkins with him, "I'm fine, I—" He pushes past Ben, who grips Eddie's shoulder in concern. Eddie wriggles free, "I'm going to wash my hands." His voice catches, strained on every word, but he locks

himself in the bathroom before any of them can comment.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

He gestures between Richie and Bev in a way that suggests he *knows* that they're not a couple but he needs the words to be spoken aloud to ease Ben's pain. Bev lets out a high pitched giggle and practically shouts "He wishes!", while Richie laughs so comically loud and fake that the noise that comes from him sounds less human and more like

"HAHA HA HAIM GAAAAAY."

Georgie laughs like this isn't a carefully crafted conversation, and then blurts out something so baffling, Richie will still find himself thinking about it when he's fifty years old. He tilts his dumb little cherubic head to the side and says, "Like Eddie!"

The bartender at the Loser's Club is a guy named Bob Grey, or as Richie and his friends like to call him, Pennywise the Dancing Clown. Penny for short. The dude's a total asshole with a creepy smile and a left eye that wanders away from the conversation more than Bob does.

Richie leans up on the counter of the bar and grabs a rag that's draped over the sink, using it to wave Bob down, "Penny, baby, can I get a gin and tonic?"

"Off my bar, Richie, before I break your teeth." It's the sort of threat that Richie wouldn't be phased by if shouted at him by an ordinary bartender, through with his bullshit, but it's not. Bob has sidled close to Richie, voice pitched high and quiet as spit collects on his bottom lip.

Richie makes an audible "Eugh" sound and shoves back roughly.

"Richopher, if you aren't busy—" Stan breezes past him, fanny pack held aloft in his hand as he heads towards the merch booth near the

lobby.

“Staniel!” Richie trots after him, “Finally conceding that you need my friendship and moral support for once, I like it.”

Stan stops abruptly, Richie slamming into the back of him, “I’m not conceding anything, I’m exploiting you for your height you weird sasquatch.” He hands the fanny pack over to Eddie who has rounded the corner for this entire exchange and lets out a helpless wail of laughter. Eddie is in fact wearing his black polo shirt, but he’s paired it with black jeans and black doc martins and the entire look has an effect on Richie that can only be described as ‘belligerently turned on and stupid’. Beverly has put some product in Eddie’s hair and instead of combing it neatly into place like it normally is, it’s pushed into an organized chaos.

Richie’s mouth is dry.

“— attention, I need you to hang this up, jackass.” Stan is pushing a banner into Richie’s hands that is really just a long strip of fabric with their band name *DEADLIGHTS* hand painted onto it.

Richie balls up the banner and gestures to Eddie, “Why are you dressed like Wednesday Addams?”

Eddie goes through a complicated face journey and Richie is *horrified* when he sees genuine hurt flit across his beautiful features before he settles on anger, “Fuck you, at least I don’t look like I do Pabst Blue Ribbon power hours and call girls ‘birds’, dickhead.”

Richie looks down at his own oversized shirt with thin pastel pink stripes and grey sweatpants, all pulled together with a pair of slip ons and digests what Eddie’s said. He barks out a laugh and looks up to share his joy of a meticulously done roasting with Eddie, only to find that he’s gone. “Oh, what happened to—”

He meets Stan’s blandly disappointed expression and shuts his mouth quickly. Stan sighs and shakes his head, “Mmm Richie, come on.”

“What?” If there’s anything Richie can count on, as universal as the sun will rise and set and the world will spin on its axis, it’s that he is

excellent at running his mouth. He also knows when he's gone too far, "I've said things like, a thousand times worse to him."

It's true. He once insinuated that he would fuck Eddie's lifeless corpse in a particularly tasteless drunken bit that involved Eddie dying of hypothermia out in the barrens. Eddie had put down his shot glass then, folded his arms over the top of the table and turned his positively shocked doe eyes on Richie. Then he had thrown his head back and laughed so hard he cried, breath tangled in his chest as he struggled to even grit out Richie's name.

Poor Mike is still traumatized by the details of that messy rant.

"I'm going to tell you this, in an entirely serious and heartfelt way, so cherish it—" Stan's voice pulls him out of his thoughts and Richie pouts, "I know you mean it all in good faith, and no one is telling you to stop being Richie, but you have to lay off Eddie's, you know—" Stan gestures to himself, hands circling over his body, "the way he appears. In all ways."

Stan has this curve to the corner of his lips that perpetually makes him look like he's either holding back laughter, or a hum of disapproval, and Richie stares at his mouth in confusion, "I don't— Stan, I love the way Eddie looks, you have to know that I actually love the way Eddie looks."

Stan holds up his hand, "I know. He's beautiful and sexy and has the most soulful eyes you could just get lost in, and don't even get you started on the cute little freckles on the bridge of his nose. Oh! And the dimples?" Stan snorts then, "You're not subtle, Rich, I get it. I'm not saying you're not attracted to him, I'm saying that Eddie's sort of going through it with everyone's perception of him, that's all. Now you put that smooth brain of yours to good use and figure out what that means for yourself."

Sometimes Richie thinks that maybe Stan is an alien. Or an old god, and that he has a cosmic knowledge about life, the universe, and all of god's creatures, yadda yadda. Richie turns and reaches up, tying the corner of their banner to the photo stand instead, "Oh, the horror of being *perceived*." He says and Stan points at him.

“You got it.”

“Is that—” the voice is familiar and warm and Richie twists his face back to look over his shoulder, “Is that *the* Stanley Uris, in person?”

Patricia Blum is the merch girl for the band Pet Sematary, a rockabilly band from Ludlow, and she’s sporting a crop top with a very glittery, very mangey looking cat on it, an oversized flannel shirt over it. Stan lights up in a way that Richie has never seen him do around any other person. This has always been their *thing*. “Baby-love!” Stan lifts Patty into his arms and spins her around, her delighted laughter filling the air. Richie feels so very fond.

“Please try that on Eddie.” Beverly’s voice is low in his ear when she comes up behind him and wraps her arms around his waist, chin resting on his shoulder.

She smells like mint and vanilla and Richie hums, “He would shred me to ribbons, you know that.”

He can feel Bev’s laugh more than hear it, “I do, that’s why I want you to try. You got him in a mood, Trashmouth.”

“I know.” Richie spins around and catches Beverly in his arms instead, spinning her the way she insisted he do to Eddie. “I don’t know how to talk to cute boys.”

He grunts when he sets her back on her feet. Bev takes his face in her hands, “I know, sweetie. But he’s Eddie, he’s your best friend. You don’t have to think about it so hard with him.”

Bev’s got bright red lipstick on that accentuates her pout and her wild red hair piled into a messy yet carefully crafted bun on top of her head, looking every bit like a rock star stuck in a shitty garage band. “How do you know *you’re* not my best friend?” Richie leans in close, their noses touching and Bev laughs quietly, clapping her hand over Richie’s mouth.

“Hi Bev! Hi Richie!” Georgie shouts excitedly and Richie lets Bev go to look at him, waving like they’re not right in front of him. There’s a guy next to him that Richie assumes is Bill Denbrough. He’s not

particularly tall, or large in stature, and there's not an aggressive thing about his presence, and yet—

Something about the sharpness of his storm blue eyes and the way he keeps his shoulder back, Richie wants to get down on his hands in knees in a show of supplication.

Ben Hanscom is standing next to him looking between Bev and Richie is what can only be described as open heartbreak. He smiles kindly anyways and holds his hand up in greeting. Georgie hustles forward and says, "This is my brother, Billy! Billy, these are Eddie's bandmates, Richie and Bev."

Bill holds his hand out like an adult and Richie stares at it stupidly until Bev reaches forward and takes it, "Thanks for coming to our show!" Bev says delightedly and Richie watches as Bill stares in a sort of horrified fascination at her grip.

She's been known to shake like a grizzled war vet.

"It's nice to m-m-meet you guys, Georgie's talks ab-b-bout you a lot." He grins when his little brother lets out an embarrassed noise and immediately starts trying to talk over him. Richie likes Bill immediately, especially when he looks at Ben, and then knowingly at Richie out of the corner of his eye and says, "You two are cute together."

He gestures between Richie and Bev in a way that suggests he *knows* that they're not a couple but he needs the words to be spoken aloud to ease Ben's pain. Bev lets out a high pitched giggle and practically shouts "He wishes!", while Richie laughs so comically loud and fake that the noise that comes from him sounds less human and more like

"HAHA HA HAIM GAAAAAY."

Georgie laughs like this isn't a carefully crafted conversation, and then blurts out something so baffling, Richie will still find himself thinking about it when he's fifty years old. He tilts his dumb little cherubic head to the side and says, "Like Eddie!"

He doesn't say it in the way other people say it about Eddie. There's

no sharp edge— no cruel twist of his mouth the way assholes like Bower’s used to when he cornered Eddie up against the locker and called him hideous names and told him what Eddie let other boys do to his body. Richie was the one who was out in high school, and Eddie isn’t even actually gay, but it was something about Eddie that made the other students single out as an easy target for their outdated homophobic bullying. It was something about the way he dressed and spoke and *felt* that made them perceive him—

Oh

Richie looks to Stan, who’s stopped canoodling with Patty in order to tap in on this conversation, and is watching with a sort of worry. He looks at Richie and frowns, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck and sighing.

Ben, recovered from his momentary insanity sparked by the thought that Richie and Bev were dating, springs into action and loudly proclaims, “Ayyy so what time are you guys on?”

Bev springs into action, the hero that she is and Richie slips away from them to poke around backstage. Maybe he should leave Eddie alone— *Probably* he should leave Eddie alone, but Richie he doesn’t want Eddie to feel *lonely*.

It’s a conundrum.

He sets his mouth into a thin line, which lasts approximately ten seconds before he opens it and loudly tells a group of people at the bar that they’re all good looking mother fuckers, and slips into the back stage area. Which is just an employee entrance to the breakroom/supply closet/ bathroom.

Eddie is curled up against Mike’s side, legs kicked up on an overturned milk crate and eyes fixed on the monitor of a computer that looks like it only runs a word processor. Mike’s one of those weird lucky assholes who has big, strong arms and a wide chest without having to actually work out, and Eddie looks cozy tucked up under his tree trunk sized bicep.

“Richie, are you wearing your pajamas?” Mike looks up from the

screen, which Richie has surmised from the sound of it that they're watching reruns of *Boy Meets World*.

Eddie snorts and lets his hand come up to rest on Mike's sternum. It's affectionate, but they've all always been affectionate friends, and Richie knows that, but it burns something wild inside of him. "You don't think I look cute?" Richie taps his shoes together and tilts his head to the side.

"I didn't say that." Mike smiles kindly, then lifts his arm on the other side. A silent offer for Richie to join them.

"We're going on soon." Richie says but he throws himself onto the couch.

"Not until after Pet Sematary, we have time." Mike scratches at the top of Richie's curls.

And then they fall into a comfortable silence, eyes turned back to the screen. Except that it isn't comfortable to Richie. He glances across Mike's chest to where Eddie's hand is, and carefully places his own hand right next to it. Eddie glances up at him, eyes dark and unreadable, and Richie wraps his pinky gently around Eddie's. It's a silent plea for forgiveness. An unspoken 'I'm sorry I overstepped *again* and I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me and overlook my bullshit— *again*'. It's also a very *very* silent, 'I love you, please let me help you not feel so alone.'

For a moment Eddie does nothing, but then he squeezes Richie's finger back, the corner of his mouth twitching.

If Mike notices that his friends are being super weird right on his very body, he doesn't mention it. Richie clears his throat, "Hey Mikey, you should see little Georgie Denbrough's smokin' hot big brother. I just met him in the lobby, the dude's one of those all American type heartthrobs. Like Bruce Springsteen, real boy next door, you know, with the sleepy blue eyes and the hair that does the —" Richie makes a swoopy gesture that no one can see, "Even Stan took a second to stop worshipping Patty to be like 'Ohhh, Bill what pretty eyes you have! And your pouty—'"

Mike gently brings his hand over Richie's mouth gently, "Reign it in." He says quietly, a low rumble of a laugh resonating in his chest, "You nervous about the show?"

Of course he's nervous, his heart is beating faster than he's running his mouth, but it's not from the show. He would play his bass naked in the middle of time square without a moment of hesitation— He's—*got*—this.

He's nervous because he's just pieced together like, two minutes ago that his best friend and love of his life might be having a gay crises. For once, he's decided to say nothing. Instead, he stays listening to the calm beat of Mike's heart for a couple of minutes and then gets too antsy and paces the room. There's enough shit in there for him to play with until the show starts.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie holds his hand out, palm upward like he's some poor man's Aladdin, and Eddie eyes him warily before sliding his fingers into it. Richie grips his hand and yanks him down onto the parking stump next to him, making enough room for Eddie to get comfortable, "You know there's probably beer and puke and hobo piss all over this?" He mutters.

Richie laughs, "No one's going out of their way to piss on a parking stump when there's a perfectly good dumpster right there." Eddie rolls his eyes. He's about to ask Richie why they're sitting here at all when Richie's face gets all soft and he says, "You know you can talk to me about anything, right Eds?"

Eddie hates it— a whole string of words that sparks the same sort of anxiety as a 'Can we talk later?' text.

Eddie keeps a loose grip on his amp cable when he walks himself across the stage, careful to keep himself behind Beverly when she bounces up to the microphone, laughs loudly and cries out "How the hell are ya, Bangor?!"

The crowd is already properly amped from Pet Sematary. Eddie makes a mental note that this is definitely the most amount of people that they've ever performed in front of and there's a serious twist of nerves in his gut. He turns the volume knob all the way down and plugs in the cable, careful to not produce any feedback before turning it back up. He knows where it's supposed to be set. The numbers roll over in his mind meticulously.

Richie saunters past, bass slung so low it bounces with the movement of his legs and he winks at Eddie, "Break a leg, Eduardo. Then I would get to see your mom get really worked into a froth and you know how hard that makes me."

Eddie scowls, “Fuck you, jackass. I hope your piece of shit bass short circuits and electrocutes you on stage.”

It delights Richie, of course it does, Eddie knew it would the moment the words left his mouth. He leans in close to Eddie, lips brushing against his ear and whispers, “And traumatize all of our fans? Think of the children, Spaghedward.”

Eddie suppresses a shiver and very decidedly does *not* think of children.

He taps his fingers carefully over the strings of the guitar, thoughts honed entirely in on every one being in tune. It’s the easiest way to keep himself from being wildly turned on on stage. Eddie chances one last looks at Richie, mostly just to glare at him.

Richie is effortless on the stage, adjusting the strap of his bass and playing his long fingers in an idle walk up the neck of it. He tosses a wink at a couple of girls standing close to the stage wearing shirts with their bands name on it, and they dissolve into a fit of giggles and not so hushed chatter. Eddie *hates* him.

In the way that Richie is so aggravating, and terrible, and hilarious, and confident, and loyal caring passionate beautiful

Richie

Eddie hates Richie in the way that is carefully grown from loving Richie so much that he doesn’t know how to keep doing it without collapsing under the weight of that love. “Anyways, Bangor, we’re Deadlights—” Beverly laughs into the microphone and Eddie tunes back into reality in time to catch the count in to their first song.

Every nerve in Eddie’s body is still alight but in an entirely different way now, and he falls easily into their set list.

Eddie was thirteen years old when he bought his first guitar. It was winter break and he had been crunching his way down the snowy sidewalks of Derry with Stan, wrapped in a heavy layer of clothing and a scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face. His mom had spent hours lecturing him on the weather and how dangerous it was

to be roaming outside in it— how his immune system couldn't handle the cold.

How he was too delicate for the snow.

She'd only let him leave the house when she saw that it was careful, quiet, polite Stanley Uris that had come to the front door asking if Eddie could work on a puzzle with him. He can still hear the quiet, relieved "Oh— Stanley" that Sonia had breathed out before, "I thought you were that filthy Tozier boy."

Stan and Eddie had shared a look and fought back their laughter. Stan had a remark at the ready, spring loaded in his throat that he wanted to bite out. Something about how Richie is filthy and that Stan is offended she would even deign to think he could be him.

Eddie was trying not to laugh because the white hot burn of shame that he felt every time his mom calls Richie filthy, and dirty, and sick, would come out in a shed of tears instead.

They hadn't gone back to Stan's to make a puzzle, because that was never the plan anyways. Stan's just good at lying to parents. They had gone downtown, looking at the holiday decorations— garland and tinsel and sparkling white lights, along the storefronts until the cold had started to creep through the thick rubber soles of their boots and through their wool socks. They were laughing through chattering teeth when the open door of a pawn shop seemed to beckon to Eddie. Even the strip of neon lights around frame looked warm and Eddie pulled Stan inside.

He had poked around at the odds and ends, letting the pleasant sting of the heating on his skin bring his toes and fingers back to life while he contemplated buying a stack of used CDs for Richie, when he looked up and saw it. It was a beat to hell acoustic guitar with sticker all over it from bands he didn't even listen to, and an index card with the price '\$10' tied to the neck. He had reached out and touched the tuning knobs, despite the stained marks on them. It was probably festering with germs but he was drawn to it.

"You play, kid?" The employee that had approached him didn't seem much older than Eddie, maybe seventeen or eighteen, and he leaned

against the counter.

Eddie looked at him warily, “Um, I don’t. Is it really ten dollars?”

The guy studied Eddie for a moment, “It is, that’s a good price, and this is a good starter guitar. You should learn how to play, ladies love a musician.” Eddie swallowed and pulled his thumb over the E string. “Or guys.”

There was a thrill that had gone through Eddie then, taking in the older teens’ easy stance— the way his fingernails were painted vibrant colors and he looked at Eddie like he had him tagged in his entirety. Eddie didn’t answer him, just reached into the pocket and stuffed a wadded up ten dollar bill at him.

He had considered Eddie’s cash before twisting it between his fingers and handing it back to him, “Take it, kid. An early Christmas gift.”

It had felt reverent. Holding that guitar in his hands for the first time and thinking ‘Mine’, before he looked up to read the employee’s nametag and saying, “Thank you, Adrian.”

Adrian had held his fist out and Eddie bumped his own against it, grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. Before Eddie could bring his new bounty back to Stan, Adrian had leaned down and quietly said, “I hope you feel as free as you deserve to when you play it.” And then he had tapped the top of the counter twice and gone to the register to ring out an elderly couple.

That was nearly seven years ago, and when Eddie stands in front of the Loser’s Club, with his immaculately cared for Gibson, he feels free.

They play three original songs and two covers, each of them unravelling Eddie more and more, to the point where he’s laughing when Richie back up against him and kisses him on the cheek, fingers never stopping their walking journey over his bass when he does it. And then Richie skipping over to Mike, hopping up onto his kick drum and leaning his tall frame over to get in Mike’s face too.

“I want to take a moment to introduce you guys to my best friends.”

Beverly's voice is worn from singing, rough and warm and she laughs, like she can't help it. Eddie gets it. He feels a little high when he's playing.

"This guy right here is Eddie—" She slips her hand into his, lacing their fingers together and pulling him close against her side, "He's letting me hold his hand despite the palm sweat and I know it's killing him. That's love." She leans her head against his shoulder, wild red hair tickling his nose. "He's the best guitarist in the northeast— probably the world— Sorry, Jud." She points to the guitarist of Pet Sematary, who is sitting at one of the high tops and he raises a beer to her.

Eddie is thoroughly embarrassed, but he can't stop Beverly when she's like this. She walks backwards, and with the grace that only Bev can muster, doesn't trip over Mike's drums. "This is Mikey, let's hear it for Mikey!" She jumps around wildly when Mike crashes his sticks against his high hat, "Our very own drum angel."

"And this guy is—" She jabs a finger at Richie to a chorus of "Trashmouth!" from the crowd.

She claps her hands together in delight, "My reputation precedes me." Richie leans into his own back up microphone to say, low, like he's sharing a secret with the crowd.

"His parents would prefer it if you call him Richie though." Bev nods seriously as Richie moves back into Eddie's personal space to sling his arm around Eddie's shoulder.

"Right!" Richie yells, microphones be damned, "As in 'Oh, Richie, right there, don't sto—'!"

Eddie slaps his hand over Richie's mouth, and the audience is beside themselves in laughter. At least if they crash and burn as musicians, Richie can always fall back on being a stand up comedian. Richie crushes Eddie's hand harder against his mouth and for a horrifying moment Eddie thinks he's going to lick it. He presses a gentle kiss to the center of his palm instead and that is—

So much worse.

“I’m Bev and we’re Deadlights. Thanks for hanging out with us tonight, and we have one last song for you.” It’s a cover of ‘I Like You So Much Better When You’re Naked’ and Eddie likes that they decided to end with it because it’s fun and ridiculous and he hopes maybe then the people that came to watch them tonight won’t later say, “Yeah, Deadlights was pretty cool, but what’s up with their uptight guitarist? Dude’s definitely got something going on.”

There’s no rush for them to get off the stage, but they still hustle, not wanting Pennywise to come around and do something gross like *interact* with them. Eddie is convinced that the creepy bastard has the ability to see right through them— right down inside the sick and dark parts of Eddie.

Richie grabs his cable and yanks it with such force, the sound of it sliding from the amp sounds like a gunshot and Eddie winces, “What the fuck, you’re going to shred your input.” He shuffles over to press against the connector, making sure it’s not loose.

Richie doesn’t give a single shit in the world when he laughs and practically bowls Eddie over, “That was fucking *amazing*, Eddie.” He says amazing like ‘Uh- MEE-Zing’, and then hefts his guitar into the air, “Thank you, Budokan!” He cries in a whisper yell and then makes a hissing sound that’s supposed to represent a crowd going wild.

“You’re going to be a nightmare tonight, aren’t you?” Eddie carefully coils up their cables between his hand and elbow.

“Because I’m super stoked about being a world renowned rock star now?”

“No,” Eddie glances up at him harshly, “Because you’re going to keep me up all night.”

Richie goes entirely alight, “Eddie—”

“No.” He knows he’s stepped in it.

“Eddie, baby—”

“That’s not what I meant, Rich, you—”

“I can keep you up *all night long*, just say the word, Eds.” Richie is so pleased with himself if the smug look on his face is anything to go by, but Eddie stops and pulls the cord to his chest.

“I thought you were going to make a mom joke.” He admits quietly, not ready address with himself why Richie’s stupid ribbing sort of sounds like a great proposition.

Richie ponders it for a moment and frowns, “I guess that would’ve been a better one, shit.” He holds his arm out, an invitation for Eddie to tuck himself into his side. “Let’s go watch Hanscom flirt with Bev, I need to keep my high going.”

He’s smells like sweat and deodorant, but Eddie still lets himself be pressed right up alongside Richie’s side, the feel of his ribs stark under Eddie’s fingertips. He makes a note to get some more protein in Richie.

Georgie practically throws himself onto Eddie when they jump off of the stage, “You guys were insane! That was the best show I’ve ever seen in my life— well, it’s the only show, but holy shit, you were so good!”

“Language.” Bill warns Georgie, but there’s not a lot of heat behind it. “G-g-great job, Eddie. Richie.”

Mike doesn’t throw himself off the stage like Richie and Eddie just did. He carefully sits down and swings his long legs over the edge, dropping solidly onto the floor and righting himself with his drum sticks tucked neatly into the pocket of his jeans. “I don’t think we’ve met yet.” Mike holds one of his hands out to Bill, whose own stoic, pleasant DNA makeup short circuits at the idea of another total heartthrob in his presence. Eddie grins and folds his arms across his chest.

“Hey, we’ll see you guys.” He grabs Richie’s wrist and tugs on it.

Mike tears his eyes away from Bill and his firm handshake long enough to throw something akin to panic at them, “After party at the Tozier-Kaspbrak household, my dudes. See you there, G-Man?” Richie points at Georgie.

“Hell yeah.” He smiles widely

“No drinking!” Bill is telling him when they slip away.

Richie yells out the invitation to Bev, Ben, Stan and Patty, and Eddie shoves him lightly, “The whole club is going to show up if you just shout it into the atmosphere.”

“Oh yeah? How are they supposed to know where we live?” He taps his forehead, “Think it through, Eds. Let’s get a move on so you can disinfect the apartment and maybe we can get a quickie in before everyone gets there.”

He rounds on Eddie, pressing his hand up underneath the fabric of Eddie’s shirt and curling those clever long finger right above the curve of his hip. Eddie lets out a curt breath of air and freezes, Richie’s thumb rubbing right underneath his ribs before he has that stupid smile on his face and Eddie can feel himself burning up. He places both hands on Richie’s chest and shoves him, “Don’t fucking— don’t touch me.” He grits out and Richie’s smile falters.

Richie holds both hands up, “Sorry.” He doesn’t say anything else, just keeps a genuinely apologetic look on his face and Eddie sighs.

He wants to elaborate— Tell Richie that it terrifies him to have Richie touch him like *that*. “I’m— Sorry, I just—” He doesn’t know how to finish this thought. How to tell Richie what he’s feeling because he’s not sure he knows the words himself.

Richie kicks Eddie’s shoe with his own, “Hey, hombre, don’t apologize. You’re allowed to not want someone to touch you.”

It’s not just that though, and Eddie doesn’t want Richie to *stop* touching him. Doesn’t want to rub his insecurities all over their friendship. “I don’t— I mean, you can touch me—” He winces and Richie chuckles but without any real teasing, “I just mean, I’m a little out of it tonight. I think I’m overwhelmed after the show is all.” And then he shrugs.

Richie holds his hand out, palm upward like he’s some poor man’s Aladdin, and Eddie eyes him warily before sliding his fingers into it.

Richie grips his hand and yanks him down onto the parking stump next to him, making enough room for Eddie to get comfortable, “You know there’s probably beer and puke and hobo piss all over this?” He mutters.

Richie laughs, “No one’s going out of their way to piss on a parking stump when there’s a perfectly good dumpster right there.” Eddie rolls his eyes. He’s about to ask Richie why they’re sitting here at all when Richie’s face gets all soft and he says, “You know you can talk to me about anything, right Eds?”

Eddie hates it— a whole string of words that sparks the same sort of anxiety as a ‘Can we talk later?’ text. “Right.” He looks down at his knees, pulled up to his chest.

“About anything though. I would never judge you for anything, or think differently about you for it. Unless you want to tell me you killed a guy, but honestly give it a few days and I’ll be over that too.” Richie stretches his legs out far in front of him, “I can be serious if you need that. Because you’re my best friend and I love you.” He grins then, wide and sincere and Eddie is mortified that his eyes immediately well up with tears.

Richie swipes the first few that fall off of his cheek and then wraps him in a tight hug, “I’m sorry—”

“Eddie.” Richie warns.

Eddie shakes his head against Richie’s shoulder, “I want to talk to you, but I— I don’t—” Eddie shoves his hands hard against his eyes, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me yet to be able to say it.”

Richie sighs. A tired sound, when he lets his hand rest on the side of Eddie’s neck, “Nothing. There’s nothing wrong with you, and I’m sorry that the world made you think that there is.”

They’re toeing the line where Eddie is about to have an entire mental breakdown right here after the best show he’s ever played, sitting in hobo piss, and Richie gets it. He always gets it, so he ruffles Eddie’s hair and says, “Let’s go party proof the apartment, superstar.”

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

A silence falls over them, Richie entirely unsure what the right thing to say is, and he focuses instead on the thrum of a bass boosted speaker system banging from the parking lot. “I hate this place.” Richie throws himself back on the bed, “Not this apartment, I love this apartment, it’s so shitty. I hate Derry, and I hate all the kids we went to high school with. I hate your mom.”

Eddie is silent for a moment and Richie’s afraid he’s genuinely offended him, but then Eddie laughs and says, “Very different sentiment than you usually have for poor Sonia.”

“Poor Sonia.” Richie repeats and snorts, “Nah, fuck her, she was a selfish shitbag of a mother and I’ll never forgive her for making you feel like you were anything less than perfect.” He admits softly, closing his eyes. Fuck it, he might as well strike this match since he’s gone in on the gasoline, “She never knew the right way to love you.”

“God damn you half Japanese girl, do it to me every time—” Richie croons from his spot on the couch where he’s slid halfway down with Eddie’s acoustic guitar on his stomach. He’s pleasantly between buzzed and drunk, and his face feels warm. “Oh the red head said you shred the cello!” He points at Bev on the floor, who claps her hands together in front of her face with delight and collapses sideways onto Ben, “And I’m Jell-O, baby.”

Eddie might be drunk too, but even with his alcohol soaked limbs, he picks his way across the living room, stepping carefully over his friends. He has a stack of cups in his hand, collecting all of the dirty dishes when he pauses in front of Georgie, “What is that?” He asks a little wildly, and Richie shakes his head.

“It’s just iced tea—”

“But you won’t talk, won’t look, won’t think of me—” Richie kicks his barefoot out at Eddie, catching him in the shin lightly, “I’m the epitome of public enemy.”

“Stop yelling at me.” He scowls at Richie, “What is that?” He points to Georgie’s cup again.

“Iced tea—”

“Richie, shut the fuck up.” Eddie pinches the bridge of his nose, still not having heard Georgie and Richie is fucking delighted. Drunk Eddie is the worst.

Bill has his hands folded across his chest pleasantly, sitting at Richie’s side on the couch and he grins, “He’s fine Eddie, I’ve been wuh-watching him.” Mike snorts, leaned back between Bill’s knees from the floor. Stan’s talking in hushed whispers with Patty in the corner, stealing kisses from the corners of her mouth between soft words. It’s all very romantic around these parts and he tracks Eddie’s path back to the kitchen with an open longing. He can do that while he’s drunk, and the rest of his friends are drunk.

It’s just him, Eddie, and Georgie. The bachelor’s club.

“Are you guys going to get married soon?” Georgie leans heavily against the coffee table and stares with all of his hard sobriety at Richie.

The alien question beats him over the head until he frowns and says, “Who?” Eddie’s back with a container of Clorox wipes, mumbling under his breath and Georgie gestures to him. “Am I marrying Eddie soon?”

When he says it out loud it makes Richie feel like he’s a child speaking fairy tales into existence. *Eddie’s going to be dressed in a grey suit that makes him look so handsome and there’s going to be flowers and he’ll cry when he sees Richie coming up the aisle.* Anyways.

A laugh bubbles up out of Bev and she slaps her hand over her mouth. Eddie lifts Mike’s arm off the coffee table so that he can wipe

underneath it, his mumbling now changed to, “He fucking *wishes*. Not until he learns how to fold his clothes once the dryer is done instead of letting everything just fucking—*launguish*.”

If he were sober, Eddie would’ve been mortified by the insinuation of it all, but he’s not, and this is great. “We’re not, like— together.” The word ‘together’ peters off and Richie gestures lazily over the top of the guitar.

Georgie almost looks more upset about it than Richie feels, “Oh. I just thought because you guys have this place together and there’s only one bedroom— You called him ‘babe’ a couple minutes ago—” Georgie explains weakly, and Ritchie can tell he’s embarrassed.

Bill nudges him lightly with his foot, “Don’t wuh-worry about it. I thought th-th-they were dating too.”

“He fucking *wishes*!” Eddie grips his Clorox wipes to his chest like a teddy bear and tilts his face towards the ceiling, “We only have one bedroom because the rent is out of control around here. That’s how you know we’re poor, I’ll deal with Richie’s snoring just so I have a roof over my head.

He gestures to said roof and Bill tilts his head towards Richie, grinning, “He talks m-m-more when he’s drunk.”

Richie’s eyes get wide and it makes Bill laugh, “He has to make room in his tiny body for the alcohol so he’s gotta let some words out.”

“Hey, Rich, it’s getting late, me and Patty are gonna head out.” Stan is already shrugging on a cardigan and Richie cranes his head back to look at him.

He snorts, “Oh, you mean you’re done utilizing my apartment to put your grubby paws all over Patty? Pat,—” Richie swivels around then, “Don’t let Stan do anything to untoward to you, do you hear me? Keep room for Jesus—”

“Bye Richie, you’re the worst.” Stan speaks right over the top of him, but Patty waves cheerily. “Bye Eddie, sorry you have the terrible taste in men, thanks for having us over.”

“Drive safe— oh!” Eddie perks up, “Are you going to bring me that biography about the agriculture guy? The dirt one?”

It’s like Eddie’s the worlds lamest person, only made more by Stanley’s unfathomably mundane interests, but combine it sets off a nuclear reactor of so goddamn amazing. They cancel out each other’s old man and Richie hums with content. Bill bats his hand lightly against the back of Richie’s, and Mike leans his chin against Bill’s thigh, so that both of them have their undivided attention on him. “So, yuh-you and Eddie *aren’t* a thing?” Bill asks his quietly, ignored by Georgie, who’s in an animated conversation with Bev and Ben. Bill looks silently amused but also a little confused.

Richie rubs the back of his neck, suddenly aware that he’s a little sweaty, “Uh. No. No, just best friends and all that.”

“But you l-luh-love him?” Bill’s voice is soft and Mike turns his eyes a little worried up at him.

Richie lets his glance flick over to Mike only for a second. He hates that Mike is now basically *in the know*. “That’s a very hefty insinuation, Big Bill.” Just like that, an easy nickname. It’s quiet, no real power behind the words.

“Tell him.” Bill squeezes his hand, all kindness and courage, “I’ve only known you two for a d-day, and I nuh-know it’s gonna be fine.”

Richie wrinkles his nose— an attempt to screw up his face enough that he won’t cry, “Don’t do that, man. It’s—” He shakes his head, “Want to hear a joke?”

Bill knits his eyes together but grins, “Sure, I’m g-g-guessing you’re going to tuh-tell me anyways.”

“You’re right!” Richie punches him lightly in the shoulder, “A guy walks into a bar. Except the guy is a kid and the bar is an elementary school— are you following?” Bill nods but Mike makes a small pained noise and says,

“Rich,—”

“Nah, nah, this is a funny one, Mike, lemme finish.” Richie holds up a

finger, "So a kid walks into an elementary school. He sits next to another boy with freckles, and these huge brown eyes, and a mouth that runs a mile a minute. He says to the kid, 'Hey, you seem like the type of guy I could love, how about we become best friends instead? I could use a little pain'. And the boy takes a hit off of his inhaler and says, 'Good idea. Think I'll grow up to be stupid hot as well. Maybe we can live together, but not like that'." Richie winks, "Whadya think, Big Bill?"

He looks back to watch Eddie walk Stan and Patty to the door and breathes deep. "That's not a very f-fuh-funny story." Bill admits quietly.

"Biggest joke of my life." Richie shakes his head, "Don't worry about it, man. I'm fine, really. This situation is old news. The oldest." He clenches his fist in front of him, "Old as balls."

There's an uncomfortable silence. One that Richie wants to fill with noise, but he's a little sleepy, and he's still warm and slow with alcohol so he watches as Mike surges up from the floor, whispering against Bill's ear. They're probably talking about him, not in a malicious way, but it still makes Richie fidget. He also watches the way Mike's grip lingers on Bill's side for a bit until Bill nods and stands up, "Me and Georgie are gonna head out. He shouldn't be out this late anyways, but I'm letting it slide since it's a Saturday."

Right. Right. Richie stands up, "Alright, old men, let me see you to the door. Can't let Eddie be the only one with manners around here."

Ben and Bev follow, as does Mike, although he's not as subtle as he thinks when he taps his knuckles against the back of Bill's before he wanders off to his own car.

Richie lingers outside, only for a moment, so that he can breathe in the crisp air of fall creeping into Derry and looks up at the night sky. There's no stars that he can see, not for all the light pollution and Richie waves up at nothing before there's a warm presence at his back, "Saying goodnight to god?"

"You believe in that?" Richie lifts his elbows, and invitation to let Eddie wrap his arms around his waist. An encouragement.

Eddie only taps his hand against Richie's side for a moment, "I don't, Rich, I would rather not dwell on this tonight." He hip checks him, "Come inside, it's chilly."

They both take showers, brush their teeth, change into pajamas, and then do what they always do once they're alone and unwinding—They curl up on Eddie's bed (Richie's is 'disgusting') and fall into non-performative conversation. "You really killed it up there tonight." Richie stretches his arms above his head, the hem of his maroon shirt that reads 'Virginity Rocks' riding up around his bellybutton.

"Was really thinking about throwing the solo to My Sharona in there, really—really shred it." Eddie pulls his lip between his bottom teeth and holds his hands up, wiggling his fingers.

Richie laughs, "I know it's a like, pipe dream or whatever, but what if we could be rock stars? Real proper rock stars like the Rolling Stones."

"Rolling Stones are a boy band." Eddie rolls his eyes, but there's an easy grin pulling at his lips, "Is that what you want to be, Rich? A rock star?"

"Duh." Richie snorts, and he stares up at the ceiling. There's popcorn texturing on it, and Richie's mapped out every possible smiley face combination in them, looking for them all for a moment. Gathering all of his friends in one place. "I want to be happy."

Simple. It is what he wants, but he doesn't mean for it to sound so melancholy. "Are you not happy now?" Eddie rolls over to prop himself up on his elbows, concern wrought all over his features.

His face is so near, Richie can look at all of the freckles— careful and soft brown over the bridge of his nose and dotting his lips. "I'm happy Eds. I'm real happy." And then, "Are you?"

They're headed into loaded conversation territory— hell, they're already there, but with the help of the healthy buzz still thrumming through Eddie's veins, he presses the back of his knuckles to his lips and hums, "I think I'm— I'm happy to be out of my mom's house. It

didn't really feel like it was my home too, but now I have my own place, with you and it's actually—"

He tries to gesture, hands all over the place and Richie smiles softly, "Real home. You're in your real home."

Eddie breathes out in relief, "Yeah. I'm home." Eddie sits up slowly, rearranging his limbs so that he's cross legged and looking down at Richie, and alternately his knees. "How did you know you were gay?"

He says it with a steely confidence, right over the wavering fear that Richie knows he's feeling just by asking it. Richie tilts his head against the pillow, "Thought about what it would feel like to kiss a boy. To touch him. I liked the way it made me feel and then just sort of went from there." It's mostly the truth, but really it was the way that Eddie had made him feel. The softness of his palms and the careful curve of this mouth. The way he wanted to hold him, and kiss him, and love him until they became dust in the sub layers of the Earth, the way history would intend them to be. Then he hoped maybe the cosmos would see that the way Richie loves Eddie transcends the space magic of the universe and it would recreate them in the stars. The thought makes Richie feel brave, "Eddie, do you like boys?"

Eddie flushes a light shade of pink, his dark eyelashes fanning out when he looks down and casting dark shadows over the tops of his cheeks, "I don't— I don't want people to think I'm weak. That's I'm delicate or—" He's struggling, staring off in the distance in an attempt to find words. "I'm sorry."

There's so much warring on Eddie's face right now— in his voice. Richie moves his hand across the sheet to nudge his pinky against Eddie's, "You think being gay will make people think you're weak?" Eddie shakes his head, "Talk to me, Eds."

"I feel—" Eddie brings his hands to his chest, tapping lightly against his own sternum like he can disrupt something inside of himself, "I feel like no matter how far away I get from my mother, or from Bowers, or from our days in school— that no matter how hard I scrub and I pray and I try that there's something dirty inside of me. I feel *filthy*." Eddie's voice cracks and his eyes are shining with the threat of

tears.

It's so alarming that Richie pulls himself upright, hands gripping Eddie's shoulders, gently but firm. "Hey, hey, what is this? Eddie you're not filthy. You're not dirty or wrong, you're amazing." This is too honest territory but Richie's heart feels splayed open, "Do you think that *I'm* filthy?"

Richie knows that Eddie doesn't, but it makes Eddie's head snap up, face distraught and clear, "No. No. Richie, I don't think there's anything wrong with you at all, I'm— I know there's nothing wrong with it, I just don't—" He holds his hands out in front of him, shaking them gently, "I don't feel like I have control over anything in my life."

A silence falls over them, Richie entirely unsure what the right thing to say is, and he focuses instead on the thrum of a bass boosted speaker system banging from the parking lot. "I hate this place." Richie throws himself back on the bed, "Not this apartment, I love this apartment, it's so shitty. I hate Derry, and I hate all the kids we went to high school with. I hate your mom."

Eddie is silent for a moment and Richie's afraid he's genuinely offended him, but then Eddie laughs and says, "Very different sentiment than you usually have for poor Sonia."

"Poor Sonia." Richie repeats and snorts, "Nah, fuck her, she was a selfish shitbag of a mother and I'll never forgive her for making you feel like you were anything less than perfect." He admits softly, closing his eyes. Fuck it, he might as well strike this match since he's gone in on the gasoline, "She never knew the right way to love you."

The bed dips next to him and Eddie tucks himself neatly against Richie's side. The first brush of Eddie's fingers, featherlight against this sternum, makes Richie suppress a shiver and he's terrified to open his eyes. Afraid that if he looks at Eddie, he'll scare him off and he'll stop the slow track of touching Richie's chest. His breath is hot against the side of Richie's neck and it's the only warning he gets before Eddie presses his lips gently to the pulse point there.

Richie can't help the way it makes his breath hitch and he curls his

fingers in the sheets, holding on for dear life when Eddie wraps his hand gently around Richie's neck. He kisses him harder then, more open with his teeth grazing against Richie's heated skin. He's going to end up with a hickey like he's in fucking 9th grade again and the idea turns him on even more than he's already getting.

"Eds, Eddie—" His voice already sounds wrecked and Eddie pushes himself up, throwing his leg over Richie's hip and *straddling* him and *holy shit*, "Oh my god." Richie breathes out. They should talk about this. Richie thinks that Eddie should probably be ruminating on his gay crisis a little more. But then his lips are on Richie's, warm and insistent and Richie isn't thinking about any of that anymore.

Eddie tastes like toothpaste and just a slight chemical undercurrent of alcohol that lingers and he pushes his tongue between Richie's teeth, making soft noises into Richie's mouth. He digs his fingers into Richie's hair, thumbs brushing over Richie's cheekbones and he hums, "This feels— really good." Eddie says between kisses.

When he sits up in Richie's lap, his hair is in mild disarray and his cheeks are flushed, lips kiss swollen and pink and Richie feels faint. It's every wet dream he's ever had haloed by the crappy apartment lighting from their ceiling fan, looking at Richie with bedroom eyes and a lazy grin. Richie just nods dumbly, "Uh, yeah."

"So, I'm definitely gay." Eddie climbs off of Richie, which is a shame and he curls back up against his side again.

"We, uh—" Richie clears his throat and fixes his glasses where they've been knocked crooked, "You can do that again. If you want."

Eddie yawns and drapes his arm across Richie's chest, "Sleep first."

His speech is as slow as his movement and Richie knows that Eddie's genuinely exhausted, but Richie's never felt more keyed up in his life. His throat clicks when he swallows and he nods, "Yeah, I— Goodnight, Eds."

Eddie squeezes Richie's ribs in response when Richie stretches an arm out to click off the bedside lamp.

In the darkness, with Eddie's breathing slowing down into sleep, Richie stares blindly up from his pillow and bites his lip to hold back the absolutely giddy laugh that bubbles up out of his chest. He rolls onto his side and pulls Eddie up against his chest, burying his face in his soft hair before letting himself be carried off to sleep as well.

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

He stands in the shower until the water runs cold and his skin is scrubbed raw and ignores Richie when he grabs his work uniform. Ignores the way he tells him, “Eddie, just talk to me, please.”

The way his eyes look sad and tired when Eddie pulls his hand out of Richie’s grasp like it’s burning him.

How broken open he looks when Eddie tells him, “I shouldn’t have let you touch me, I’m sorry.” And then Eddie is stumbling out of their apartment complex.

Eddie was thirteen years old the first time a song made him cry. He was lying in bed with his headphones shoved into his ears, listening to a CD that he had found in Richie’s room. It was a mix of songs, most of them things he had already heard, when Jeff Buckley’s cover of Hallelujah had come on.

The somber collaboration of his guitar with the longing in Buckley’s voice and in Cohen’s words had touched a loneliness in Eddie that had terrified him. He had turned his face into his pillow, the back of his wrist shoved against his teeth and he had cried.

There weren’t any words for that loneliness— that longing and that fear and that want. Not back then, anyways, when he was only thirteen.

But he feels it now, fingers twisted in fear into his pillow case, so tightly that his knuckles whiten. He feels it when he watches Richie’s chest rise and fall slowly in sleep, and his messy curls spread out over the sheets. The way Richie’s lips are parted, careful around his slightly crooked front teeth, and Eddie now knows how they feel against his own.

Eddie pushes himself onto his knees slowly, heart rabbiting in his

chest as he stretches his legs carefully to climb over Richie without waking him. He balanced awkwardly over the top of him, when Richie stretches and Eddie freezes up.

Richie blinks his eyes open, sleepy and unfocused without his glasses, and Eddie does the only thing he can think in the moment, reacting entirely on muscle memory. He grabs Richie's glasses off the nightstand and situates them carefully on his face.

He's still in Richie's lap.

He's still got his fingers gently bracketing Richie's face.

Richie makes a soft, tired noise, and smiles at Eddie like he's the only sunlight he needs and not the yellow glow filtering through their cheap blinds. "Morning, Eds." He slips his hands underneath the hem of Eddie's shirt, tracing up his curved spine, "This is definitely the prettiest thing I've ever woken up to." He's got a teasing lilt to his voice, still rough with sleep, but his expression is devastatingly sincere.

Eddie still hasn't moved.

The words are there, attainable at any other moment. *I'm the only thing you've ever woken up to, loser.* He bites his lip instead and lets out what he will embarrassingly think back on as a whimper. "I—yeah, good morning." His voice is barely more than a whisper and Richie wraps an arm around Eddie's waist, rolling him easily into the bed.

Eddie really can't get his wits about him when Richie laces his fingers into Eddie's, stretches his arms above his head and presses him into the mattress. He kisses Eddie's shock slack mouth, the warm weight of his body on top of him making Eddie sigh. Richie hums and kisses over the curve of Eddie's jaw, "Do you work today, baby?" his mouth is warm against Eddie's neck, and his hand travels from Eddie's own where it's pinned in the sheets next to his head, running solidly down his arm.

Fight or flight wars inside of Eddie and is ultimately silenced by the growing pit of *want* that coils in his stomach. A solid mix of Richie

seeking out all of the bare skin he can touch on Eddie, calling him things like *baby* in that sleep soft voice, and the noticeable hardness between Richie's legs where he's pressed against Eddie's hips. It's all too much, too fast, too real, and Eddie grabs Richie's hips hard—harder than he should for how gentle and easy Richie is being with him, and he arches up, moaning into Richie's shoulder.

“Not until three—” Eddie tells him, a little breathless as he pushes Richie off of him to sit up, ripping his own shirt off, “Rich, Richie, I need—”

Richie is momentarily speechless. A rarity for him and he pushes his hair off of his forehead, looking over Eddie in disbelief before he shakes himself out of his stupor, “Fuck, Eddie, yeah what do you need?”

He looks like he has absolutely no idea what to do with his hands, so Eddie grabs one of them between his own and presses it to his chest. His heart is rabbiting behind his ribs, no doubt that Richie can feel him moments from shaking apart underneath his fingers. Eddie knows how he must look, eyes wide with uncertainty and hazy with need, clinging to Richie's hand like a lifeline and he inhales shakily, “I need—you. I need you.”

The way Richie looks at him nearly makes Eddie cry, and then he's being shoved back onto the bed again, being kissed like Richie is trying to climb inside of him and that's—

oh

His skin is on fire in every place that Richie puts his hands, and Eddie starts to tug clumsily at his shirt too, “Take this off.”

Any other day this might come out demanding. A severe, ‘*Pay attention, Richie, Jesus Christ*’. It's a desperate plea now though, and Richie obeys it without question, throwing his shirt somewhere in the vicinity of his own bed across the room. He touches Eddie with a quiet reverence then, glasses sat a little crookedly on his nose where they had been knocked aside in his hurry to undress. “Eddie, god, you look— so beautiful.”

He's being too slow, too careful, too honest and Eddie squeezes his eyes closed when he pulls Richie down on top of him. Just to feel their chests pressed together, bare skin to bare skin. Just to hide keep Richie from seeing the look on Eddie's face that says 'I love you' and 'I'm sorry I'm making you dirty now too, I'm sorry I made you touch me'.

Richie's lips move hungrily over him. From his lips to his neck, down the flush skin of his chest, and he brings his hand to the front of Eddie's sweatpants and presses down. Eddie's brain short circuits and he can't stop the embarrassingly loud moan he lets out. Richie laughs, a quiet rumble that Richie can feel against his chest more than hear it, "You like that?" His fingers curl around the hard shape of him, stroking Eddie through his pants, "I can make you feel even better."

It's dangerous, the way Richie says it, a low whisper against Eddie's ear when he pushes his fingers into the front of Eddie's sweatpants, popping open the singular button there and into his boxers. "Richie, please." Eddie's gasping against Richie's lips, heels digging into the bed in an attempt to press himself harder and faster into the warm grip of Richie's fingers.

"What do you need?" Richie rubs his thumb over the leaking tip of Eddie's dick, twisting his hand expertly, in just the right way that makes Eddie sob with pleasure.

The thought from earlier is massive and Eddie shoves weakly at the top of Richie's sweatpants. "I want—" take me apart, fill me up with enough of you that there isn't so much of *me*, "I want you inside me, Richie, I want you to fuck me."

Richie pulls back slightly, hand still on Eddie and he blinks behind his glasses. "Not that that isn't the hottest thing I've ever heard in my life, but I think, uh—" He grins but there's a line of concern there, "We should take it slow today? Not everything at once, you know?"

Eddie can feel the shame start to spread, his face burning with it, "I'm sorry, I—"

"No!" Richie bends down and presses a kiss to Eddie's stomach, "No,

no, I'm not saying I don't want that. Shit, Eds, I've been thinking about how many ways I want to have you since my dick figured out how to function."

"Gross." Eddie scrunches up his nose and Richie laughs.

He kisses Eddie's hipbone a few times as he carefully pulls Eddie's pants down, boxers and all. And now Eddie is naked and embarrassed and vulnerable.

And he told Richie that he wants to be fucked by him.

"Fuck." Richie sits back like he's admiring a work of art, "Fuck, I always knew you would be gorgeous like this, but this is unfair." Eddie wants to cross his arms over his chest and wrap himself up in the sheets, but Richie grabs Eddie's legs and hauls them over his lap. He drags his hands up Eddie's thighs and wraps one of his hands around Eddie's dick again, stroking him slowly, "I want that, though."

Eddie curls his fists into the sheets, "Rich—"

"Want to work you open with my fingers and get you so out of your mind for my cock." He can see the strain of Richie against his own sweatpants, a small wet spot forming in the front of the material and the way it twitches when Eddie moans. "Wanna make you feel so good, take you apart for hours." Richie leans forward, kissing Eddie right underneath his sternum, "Want you to know how good you make me feel, how much I've thought about it. About you."

"You've thought about me?" Eddie's voice is wrecked and he buries his fingers into Richie's hair as he kisses over his stomach.

Richie hums, "When I touch myself?" His eyes are dark and blown wide when he looks up at him, "All the time. I could tell you what I think about, but I really wanna taste you right now." Eddie bites his lip and uses all of his strength and willpower to not come right this very second. Richie's breath is hot against Eddie's dick, and he brushes his lips lightly against the underside of it, flicking his tongue out against the head, "This okay?" He's got a hand wrapped around the base, the tip of it pressed carefully to Richie's lips.

Eddie has to breathe deep, and he nods, “Yeah, but— I’m not gonna last long.” He warns and Richie simply squeezes his thigh in response before wrapping his lips around Eddie’s dick and sinking down on it slowly.

It’s been years since Eddie’s gone to church, but this feels something like holy.

He digs his fingers into Richie’s curls, arches up off the bed and can’t help the litany of ‘Please, Richie’ and thoughts he didn’t know he could put into words. Things that border on dangerous when he gasps out “Richie, I, I—”

He doesn’t last long, unable to even warn Richie when his vision swings unfocused and he comes down Richie’s throat. Eddie whines when Richie sucks a little too long at his now sensitive dick and he laughs, kissing Eddie’s thigh.

The bed dips next to him almost violently when Richie throws himself next to Eddie, rubbing his nose harshly against Eddie’s cheek. It’s such a sweet gesture, warm and playful when Richie kisses him loudly on the shell of his ear and laughs.

It’s loving and far too innocent after Eddie’s just marred all of Richie. The gnawing fact that his darkness, his weakness, his sickness is now all over Richie settles heavy and terrible over Eddie’s exhausted body. It’s in the way the sweat is cooling against his skin and Eddie sits up almost violently.

Richie cracks an eye open, his glasses laying on the pillow next to him, “You alright, Eds?”

He can’t breathe.

“Richie, I— I’m so—”

He’s scrambling to pull his boxers back on when Richie sits up, “Eddie, woah, what’s wrong? Do you need your inhaler?”

Eddie curls his hands into fists, his fingernails cutting into his palms and he breathes deep, “I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

It's cold when he stumbles out of the bed, and Richie shoves his glasses onto his face, "What are you sorry for? Eddie, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"I have to take a shower." Eddie checks his hip hard against the doorframe in his frantic departure and he slams the bathroom door shut, twisting the shower faucet on as hot as it will go. He paces the bathroom, shaking his hands out. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He mutters to himself.

You have to take your medicine, Eddie-bear, you're sick. You don't want to be sick anymore, do you?

Gonna let me have a turn with that smart-ass mouth of yours, Kaspbrak? You think your boyfriends will share?

What are you gonna do about it, weak little—

Eddie falls to his knees in front of the toilet, pitching forward when he throws up, hand braced painfully against the wall behind it.

He stands in the shower until the water runs cold and his skin is scrubbed raw and ignores Richie when he grabs his work uniform. Ignores the way he tells him, "Eddie, just talk to me, please."

The way his eyes look sad and tired when Eddie pulls his hand out of Richie's grasp like it's burning him.

How broken open he looks when Eddie tells him, "I shouldn't have let you touch me, I'm sorry." And then Eddie is stumbling out of their apartment complex.

He makes it halfway to work, unsteady on his bike when he pitches to the side and barely manages to keep himself upright. His bike clatters onto the sidewalk and Eddie makes it to the grass, collapsing onto his rear. He breathes once. Twice.

A sob tears out of his throat.

He's ruined everything, just like he always has. If he had just left Richie alone, hadn't acted on his feelings or let their proximity and the warm confidence of alcohol take the wheel and kiss him, he

wouldn't be here right now. Eddie looks down at his shaking hands and thinks, 'I should've never left my mother's house in Derry'.

Still his mother's house, not actually his, but it was safer than this.

When he pulls his phone out of his pocket, there's a single text from Richie that just says; *Can you come home so we can talk?*

No 'Eds', no dirty jokes, no swearing or long line of typos to be had, and Eddie wipes the tears off his face hard enough that it makes his cheeks sting. He doesn't answer Richie, calling Ben instead.

Hey, Eddie!

His voice is chipper when he answers, and of course it is. He got to spend all night with Beverly and they probably talked for hours and maybe even kissed, careful and shy before he asked her if he could take her out some time. Eddie swallows back the nausea that's bubbling up in his stomach. "Hi, Ben, I'm sorry I know this is short notice but I— I can't come into work today."

Eddie's voice is wobbling, cutting in and out and Ben makes a soft noise, *Don't apologize, are you okay?*

The kindness threatens to send Eddie into a spiral. " 'M fine. I mean — I'm sick, I'm just sick, and—"

Eddie, hey, hey, do you need me to come get you? I can have Lisa watch the place for the night, I'm sure she would love the overtime. Ben adds lightly, an attempt at levity, *Do you want me to call Richie?*

Eddie laughs and it comes out as more of a pitiful cry and he shakes his head at the nobody that's around, "No, I'm— Thank you, Ben. I'm going to be okay, I just— I'm really sorry again."

There's a beat of silence on the other end before, *Stop apologizing, and feel better. Let me know if you need me though, or anything.*

"Yeah, I will, thanks." Eddie disconnects and lets his phone fall into the grass next to him.

It's a short lived separation, vibrating in the grass only a minute later

and he sighs, ready to decline the call from Richie. The screen is filled with a wholly unflattering picture of Stan, taken from underneath his chin. Eddie considers declining him as well, but knows that Stan will hunt him down and demand an explanation.

Eddie clears his throat and takes a deep breath. "Stanley."

"Edward "

The even timber of Stan's voice does a little to unfurl the terrible knot in Eddie's chest and he feels the corner of his mouth twitch in an attempted smile, "What's up, man?"

"Oh, you know, this and that. Old Dog Records is doing a sale on all their back catalog of vinyl and I wanted to know if you were up for a trip back to Ye Olde Derry. Are you working?"

"Nah, I called out. Needed a personal day." Eddie stretches his legs out in front of him, tapping the ends of his sneakers together. They're rough adidas that have faded and sun bleached canvas, but he can't bring himself to part with them. They're just so perfectly worn out to his feet. Stan makes a cartoonish surprised noise.

"You're becoming a real rebel, Eddie! Bangor has made a complete hooligan out of you. Or maybe that was Richie."

Eddie doesn't say anything, only watches a jogger as he tools past.

"What did he do?"

Stan's voice is heavy with exhaustion and spring loaded disappointment. Eddie startles, "Wait, what?"

"Richie. What did he do? And don't say nothing I can fucking sense it in my bones."

Eddie does laugh then, but it's humorless, "He actually didn't do anything. At least not anything bad." Stan doesn't say anything, doesn't press for more, because he knows that Eddie will tell him. "We had sex."

"I imagined this conversation starting out a bit more positive when it

happened”

“When it happened.” Eddie repeats him and pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

“It was inevitable” Stan sighs, *“Why do you sound so sad then? Did he ghost you or something? His bed is literally five feet away from yours, I don’t know how you could’ve been left to walk of shame”*

“He didn’t ghost me, I sort of— I guess ran away?” There’s more cursing from Stan and Eddie flinches, “It’s not what you think, I don’t regret that it was him or saying he did anything wrong, but he was so careful and sweet and he talked to me like— like—” Eddie swallows wildly on the air.

“Like he loves you” It isn’t a question, *“Eddie, just let him love you. You deserve that, you know?”*

Eddie can feel the tears threatening again and he doesn’t want to cry again, “But Richie, he— he deserves better, he—”

“Richie is an asshole, Eddie. He’s an asshole, he talks to much, he dresses like a fucking Muppet, he’s insecure and he’s insensitive a lot of the time. He’s not perfect, don’t put him on a pedestal, that’s not fair to him.” There’s some general shuffling on the other end while Stan situates himself, and Eddie can tell he’s in for an earful, *“Richie is an asshole, but he’s loyal and he’s a good friend, and unfortunately he is sort of funny. He’s kind, and full of love and most of that is for you. He’s a really, really good guy, and he’s only getting better, and if you can’t see that you’re contributing to that then— Well, it’s probably your mom’s fault, but—”* It pulls a rough laugh out of Eddie and Stan chuckles on the other end of the line, *“but you have to let him in. You have to let other people into your life, in a real way. What are you so scared of?.”*

Eddie tucks his knees up to his chest and turns his cheek on top of them. The wind is picking up and Eddie is cold in his insufficient long sleeved shirt, but he likes the way it makes him feel some sort of clarity, “Me. I’m afraid of me.”

Stan hums, *“Kaspbrak, you are a psychoanalyst’s wet dream. Drop your coordinates, I’m coming to get you.”*

"I'm sitting in the grass on near Cyprus. In front of the UPS shipping office." He wants to tell Stan that he doesn't think he can stomach an actual heart to heart, but he also knows Stan better than that. Their friendship is something a little more neatly organized than the rest of his band. He and Stan operate on the same wavelength, and his stern calm keeps Eddie grounded. Eddie likes the way Stan purses his lips together in disappointment and keeps his stern hazel eyes narrowed at him when he's being particularly difficult. When any of them are. It's genuine and hilarious.

"That's very tragic small town of you. I'll be there in five, and I'll bring you a coat. I know you ran out of that apartment unprepared you mess." Eddie can hear the sound of Stan's car keys jingling.

Eddie laughs, "How did you know?" He feigns surprise.

"I've never seen someone who panics quite as impressively as you" Stan says, *"I'll see you in five. Oh— and text Richie or something. Just let him know that it's going to be okay and you needed a moment? I love you, Eddie, but I also know that Richie is probably a disaster right now— One that Bev is going to have to end up dealing with, mind you— and I love him too."*

The thought of texting Richie makes Eddie feel sick all over again, but he knows that Stan is right. "I'll see you in five minutes."

Stan hangs up first, and Eddie stares at the 'call ended' screen until it blinks to darkness. There's grease on the phone from his face and Eddie wipes in quickly on the top of his pants before opening up the message from Richie. He taps it out quickly, before he can lose his nerve.

Called out of work, I'm with Stan. Sorry for running out on you I had to clear my head. I'm not used to this. We'll talk when I get home.

And then

Sorry I'm such a mess. I'm working on it

There's unspoken words in all of it. Ones that Eddie knows Richie will see for what they are. Meaning in all of the spaces between

letters, hanging off of pixelated serifs, and his heart clenches when he see the three dots of Richie typing.

Ur not a mess Eds.

A blatant lie, but it makes Eddie smile.

I'll be here <3 DO you want me to pick up something to make for dinner

It's so simple and Eddie can't even let himself feel even remotely irate for the lack of punctuation. So Richie. *We can make something later. I'll see you tonight.*

He feels like a school kid when he tacks a heart emoji on the end, and definitely locks his phone and shoves it into his pocket, cheeks burning, but it makes him feel sort of giddy too. His way to letting Richie know that there's a part of him, no matter how shoved down he tries to keep it, that Eddie wants to have this with him. That he wants to be cute and romantic with him.

That he might be ashamed of himself, but he's not ashamed of Richie.

Notes for the Chapter:

What's a sex scene without a little angst and self hatred?

Tumblr >>> inkandowl <<< I draw, I write, you can come talk to me whenever!

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

“Are you going to cry?” Bev raises an eyebrow at him while she situates herself in her seat, pulling her purse carefully into her lap, lest it touch something wild and unsavory from the bus. Bodily fluids might be a real possibility.

The world outside looks crisp. All of it oddly in focus in the early onset of winter, when it’s cool enough that it seems to focus everything in sharp relief. Richie wants to touch the back of his knuckles to the window to see if the glass is as cold as it feels, and then thinks better of himself, shoving his hands into the pockets of his bomber jacket instead. “I don’t know. Maybe.” He looks over at Bev, whose face is much closer than he anticipated. He can see all the subtle freckles on her cheeks and the little flecks of eyeliner under her eyes that she hadn’t quite gotten off from last night before applying a new face of makeup. “Bev, I don’t think I’ve ever been this sad in my life.”

“I really can’t stay”

“Baby, it’s cold outside.”

“I’ve got to go away—”

“But baby, it’s cold outside!”

Bev and Mike are crooning loudly over the top of each other and even though Richie wants to Die. Just capital ‘D’, drop dead, roll his ass into the trash heap, sayonara mister Tozier!— He doesn’t hate this.

Beverly strikes a triumphant pose on the sidewalk and punches her fist into the air. Thematically unbecoming of the creepy Christmas

song. Mike laughs and shoves his fists into the pockets of his hoodie, glancing back at him. “I hate quiet Richie. I feel like you’ve been body snatched.”

He stops walking just so Richie is equal with him and then drops one of his arms around Richie’s shoulder. Forever, Mike towered over the rest of them, but Richie’s finally catching up, and he leans solidly against him. “Sorry.” He tells Mike and offers up an apologetic smile.

Mike frowns and looks at Bev who dry heaves loudly, “Don’t do *that*.”

“We should go drink!” Richie declares, “Is there drinking at this place?”

“You’ve been to Old Dog before. Did you forget Derry already?” Mike asks, while they’re walking to the bus stop. To wait for a bus. To Derry.

“I’m having a really bad fucking day.” Richie throws himself onto the metal bench, long legs stretched out in front of him and groans. “It started out nice though.”

Bev crowds herself into Richie’s side instantly, arms around his waist and head tucked up under his chin. Mike takes the more cautious approach of leaning against the side of the stop and watching him with those soft, warm, brown eyes. Stupid handsome men and their stupid brown eyes. “He sent you a heart emoji, though.” Bev points to Richie’s phone where it’s clutched in his hands, screen black.

“I don’t understand what the problem is here, though. You guys finally got it together, he panicked— which, honestly, we all were expecting that from Eddie, right?” Bev hums but Richie feels wildly defensive of Eddie then, “He texted you and told you he wanted to talk though. And that he just needed a moment and then the heart emoji.”

His whole life is forever going to hinge on that heart emoji. “He told me he shouldn’t have let me touch him. You didn’t see his face, he was so— I don’t know—” Richie shrugs, “It’s like he came to his senses and realized he was looking at a murder scene. I don’t get it! He woke me up, *he* got on top of *me* and was all ‘Good morning,

Richie, I know you were nervous that today would be weird after we kissed last night, but I'm just gonna let you know now that I'm here to look all soft and cute and— and—” Richie gestures roughly to his face before shoving his hand violently back at the air in front of him. “There was this moment I just thought— he was looking at me and I swear it was the same way I must look at him all the time. He looked at me like he was in love.”

Richie promptly takes his glasses off and shoves them on top of his head. He refuses to keep facing the world, at least for the next 1-2 minutes.

The Mike shaped human next to him shuffles uncomfortably, “Not that it's my business to make assumptions on anyone's feelings but, uh— Eddie does love you, Rich.”

“Mike—” Beverly says his name low. A warning shot.

“What?” He gestures wildly to Richie who puts his glasses back on, “You saw it on his face, so tell him you love him.”

Richie laughs loudly, “That was fucking projection, bro.” The bus is pulling up to the stop and Mike scoffs.

“That was a fucking sign, *bro*.”

“If I cry right now, here on this fine Maine public transport, will that be sexy or will you guys judge me?” Richie ambles up the steps of the bus, following Beverly to the back.

“Are you going to cry?” Bev raises an eyebrow at him while she situates herself in her seat, pulling her purse carefully into her lap, lest it touch something wild and unsavory from the bus. Bodily fluids might be a real possibility.

The world outside looks crisp. All of it oddly in focus in the early onset of winter, when it's cool enough that it seems to focus everything in sharp relief. Richie wants to touch the back of his knuckles to the window to see if the glass is as cold as it feels, and then thinks better of himself, shoving his hands into the pockets of his bomber jacket instead. “I don't know. Maybe.” He looks over at

Bev, whose face is much closer than he anticipated. He can see all the subtle freckles on her cheeks and the little flecks of eyeliner under her eyes that she hadn't quite gotten off from last night before applying a new face of makeup. "Bev, I don't think I've ever been this sad in my life."

Richie whispers it, a frown set on his lips. Beverly touches his face lightly and kisses the corner of his mouth, "I know, sweetheart. Did Eddie tell you what he's doing today?"

Richie nods then shrugs, "Sort of. He said he was hanging out with Stan, but that's it. He called out of work."

"Ben told me." Bev is digging through her bag and doling out gum to Mike and Richie.

"Did you go home with him last night?" Mike asks, pushing his fingernail up underneath the foil wrapper.

Now *this* is a conversation Richie wants to involve himself with. "Ooh, yes, Bevv, did you let Benjamin Hanscom do scandalous things like—" He leans in close, exchanging a conspiratorial glance with Mike, "Hold your hand?"

Mike gasps and says "No!"

Beverly rolls her eyes so hard it's almost loud, "We didn't hold hands." She presses her own stick of gum in her mouth then grins, "We did make out though."

"Beverly!"

"Why I never!"

Beverly laughs, absolutely delighted, "And then we had sex."

Richie presses his hand wildly to his forehead and inhales, "You absolute tart, Beverly Marsh—"

"Oh, don't even, you sucked your best friends dick after telling him you wanted to— what was it?" She looks over at Mike.

“Finger him open?” Mike supplies, all calm cool and collected.

Beverly snaps, “Right, finger him open until he’s begging for your—”

“Ah!” Richie claps his hand over her mouth, “I said that out loud?”

Mike snorts, “You say everything out loud.”

Richie blushes but he laughs when he meets Beverly’s eyes, “Okay, but I’m a gross slut, it’s literally in the title. Trashmouth Tozier, baby. Hearing Mike repeat it makes me feel like I need to go back to church.” He crosses himself for good measure.

He feels infinitely lighter in this moment, and Richie is so gratefully in love with his friends. “So, Bill asked me out.” Mike drops that bomb like it’s a comment on the weather, and Richie and Bev both round on him so fast that he holds his hands up, “On a date. We hung out for a while after we left and it was really nice, he’s real—”

“Dreamy?” Richie supplies, because he’s right.

Mike lets out a light, airy chuckle, worthy of a hallmark romcom and Beverly grips her knees tightly, “Did you finger him open?” She chirps, and that chuckle turns into a hysterical laugh.

Richie wails, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, please let this bus roll down a ravine so that I can die in a *real* fiery crash, instead of being slow roasted by my own family.”

Beverly’s eyes go wide and she mouths ‘Never’ at him. Mike wipes the tears from his eyes because he’s a dramatic asshole, “I did not. We did kiss, only one kiss though, it was nice. I think I need to start taking tips from Richie though. What else is it you said to Eddie?” His expression turns quizzical and Beverly claps her hands together delightedly.

“No,” He crosses his arms over his chest, failing to keep from laughing, “I’m not talking to you guys the rest of this trip to Derry.”

“What a fucking joke.” Bev shakes her head, “I give it thirty seconds before you crack.”

They settle into a comfortable banter then. One that gets them only a few dirty looks from the other passengers on the bus and Richie thinks that this is the sort of day he needs in order to have his big make or break talk with Eddie tonight.

Getting off the bus in Derry is a bit like clawing your way out of the grave only to come back because you forgot your favorite jacket in the coffin. Richie expects that the people here will see them and just smell the small town escapee on them, and doing something wild. Like sneer. Or maybe act like the crowds in Inception, where they sense a disturbance in the dream fabric and turn on them like an infection. It's a bit much for Richie's mind to process but now that the thought is there, it's going to have to live with all of his other ideas until he's bored with it.

"This place is colder than Bangor." Mike remarks, rubbing his hands together.

"It's because Derry is a fucking void. All the happiness and warmth is just sucked into the dirt here." Richie frowns.

"There's gotta be a black hole around here somewhere." Bev shoulders her purse.

"Under the Neibolt house, probably." Mike adds and Richie points at him.

"Definitely under the fucking Neibolt house." He walks ahead of Beverly and Mike, even though he isn't positive where he's going. It's been a good two years since he's been to Old Dog Records, and he barely remembers anything he did last week. There's a cheesy holiday display up in the laundromat on the corner and Richie laughs excitedly, "Holy shit, they're still doing the sexy Jesus nativity."

He doesn't look when he runs out in the road, god willing that a car will take him out right now, but he emerges unscathed on the other side. There's an eclectic mix of figurines sitting in the window, tossed together from whatever lost and found hell the owners were hoarding. Christmas isn't for another couple of months, but this has always gone up around mid August. Richie's favorite part of the display is always the tiny plastic David Hasselhoff that is shoved into

the manger, obviously the only thing small enough to fit there and He pulls out his phone. "The owners gave him a little crown this year, look how holy." He snaps the picture, tongue caught between his teeth, "I gotta send this to Eds, he's gonna lose his mind."

They used to come down here every year and Eddie was the only one in this entire town exciting enough to actually go inside of the laundromat and plant something subtle and ridiculous in the display. One year, when they were fifteen, it had been a one inch by one inch framed picture of someone's grandma that they had found at the Goodwill for five cents, and Richie thought for sure that one would get them caught. Alas, Grandma had made it until January.

"Um," Beverly's voice is pitched high, "I don't know if you should send it to him."

Richie zooms in on Jesid Hasselchrist and snaps a few photos, "Why? This isn't some clingy 'pay attention to me' thing. He's still my friend, and he loves the sexy Jesus display. I feel like he would be madder if I didn't send it to him."

He's arguing but his voice and his hands drop defeated. Mike points up the street, "Show it to him after your talk, we're gonna miss the show."

Richie passes his gum between his teeth and furrows his eyebrows, "What show? I thought we were going to Old Dogs. You guys said there was a sale on vinyls, 800% off or whatever and that's why we had to trek our soggy asses out to *Derry*."

"Ew, Richie, reign it in." Beverly holds up her hand, "Old Dogs knocked in that wall that connected them to the tea room. Bought it out and turned it into a café slash open mic venue. We're gonna politely nod along to the terrible amateurs after we load up on swag."

Richie shoots one last studious glare at Mike before barking out a laugh, "I love it when you talk like that, Bev. You're like an out of touch millennial still trying to be hip with the Gen Z kids."

"I *am* an out of touch millennial." She says proudly and flips her hair over her shoulder.

“No you’re not—” Mike pipes up, and then he’s launching into a spiel about how she’s only 20 and the youngest millennials are 22 or whatever. Richie’s tuned him out, opting instead to study every store front and alley way. Every open patch of grass or dirt that he can attribute back to his childhood— namely, back to Eddie.

All of the spaces of Richie’s life, from massive and loud, like their music and buying an apartment together, to the tiny and intimate—the way Richie’s heart beats and that freckle on Eddie’s bottom lip. All of it is filled with Eddie.

Old Dog used to be an underwhelming sort of business, but when they come up on the new store front, complete with an actually interesting artistic display and some string lights, Richie practically yanks the door of the hinges and declares, “Oh, this place is actually cool as fuck now.”

“Thanks.” The guy that says it is rounding a display of remastered 70s collections and offers up a tired nod. He’s a middle-aged guy with a hint of blonde stubble at his jaw and greying hair, but his smile is charming and he’s handsome. Richie flushes a little, but then regains his composure and slides himself along the crates.

“So, you come here often?” He flicks through a stack of records.

“Rich—” Beverly shakes her head but she’s trying not to laugh.

“Actually, I own this place, so yes. Shouldn’t you be in school?” The man quirks an eyebrow at him.

Richie clutches his chest, “One, I’m twenty, and two—” he points at the clock behind him, “It’s 6pm, no one is in school. Christ, you’re old.”

That makes the man laugh, and he holds his hand out, gripping Richie’s in a way that would make any dad proud “I’m Danny.”

“Richie.” He might push his shoulders back just a little bit straighter then.

Danny introduces himself then to Mike and Bev and asks, “I haven’t seen you guys around here, I’ve been set up about six months now,

where did you blow in from?”

“Bangor.” Bev offers up, “But we grew up in Derry, that’s how we know *you’re* not from these parts.”

“Oh no.” Danny shakes his head and nods for them to follow him while he walks around the shop, gathering up a collection of amp cables he had left on top of some crates, “Colorado, actually. Thought it might be a nice change of pace, get out to the coast. Most of my patrons are out of towners, lot of people from Levont or Glenburn play here on Sundays and I think it’s getting some of the Derry locals out of their shells.”

Danny is rambling a bit, picking things up as he goes, but Richie finds himself wanting to keep following him around. Bev and Mike must feel it too because they’re right by his side, attention entirely on Danny’s benign conversation like it’s the coolest thing they’ve ever heard. “—I guess that’s why it’s surprising that those two other boys are here that grew up in Derry.”

Richie tunes in then, “Wait, who? Derry is basically only a mile long, everyone knows each other here.” He looks excitedly at Bev. He hopes it’s Nate and Conrad, those two always talked about music with Richie back in high school and it would be rad to see them again.

“Pretty sure they said their names are S—”

“Oh shit!” Mike holds his hands up in horror as the display of headphones behind him topples over, crashing to the ground, “I’m so sorry, I—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Danny rushes over, checking first that Mike is okay before pulling the stand back up, “These things are so wobbly, are you sure you’re alright?”

Mike checks his palm and grins sheepishly, “Yeah, I’m sorry again, I need to pay attention. I think we’re gonna go sit down in the café for a bit. Gotta nurse my pride.”

It makes Danny chuckle lightly, “Of course, they’ve been playing

around in there on the mic for a couple hours already now so feel free to join them whenever.”

Richie presses down on every bobble head he passes at the counter, “Playing around with what?”

“Oh, slam poetry, or really just roasting their friends and making jazzy speeches about werewolves. A couple songs here and there, everyone’s pretty much family now.” Danny is shoving the headphones back onto the stand.

“It’s a group?” Bev peeks around the door frame into the smoky café.

“Not an organized one.” Danny laughs, “Just a group of strangers making their own form of therapy.”

It’s a maybe joke but Richie likes the sound of that. He could probably stand up at a microphone and talk for hours and hours, but to just have five minutes to be seen? Absolute decadence. “Can I sing you Catherine Wheel or would an eight minute odyssey about black metallic be too much?” Richie bends down to ask Bev and she twirls behind his back, pushing him towards a black leather couch pushed into the corner.

There is a decent crew of roughly forty people gathered in the central area of the café, cheering loudly for a girl playing a ukulele cover of Blue Oyster Cult’s Godzilla. “Maybe a bit much for this crowd right now. Pop a squat, do you want a coffee?”

No, because no one makes coffee exactly the way he likes, the way Eddie does, and Richie is a spoiled rotten brat. “Yeah, sure, ask them to make me pretty art in it. The prettiest, like I deserve.” He sits across from Mike, who’s occupied a strange vinyl armchair against the wall. “Are we going to play tonight?”

Being around live music and not playing makes Richie itch. Especially when it’s accessible. “I imagine you will.” Mike tells him knowingly and it’s strange. Mike’s been acting strange.

“You’ve been acting strange.”

“History shows again and again, how nature points out the folly of

man.” The girl on the microphone croons and the crowd mournfully sings back “Godzilla!”

Mike never answers him, just watches the girl sing, and Richie reaches out with his foot and nudges Mike’s leg, “Hey. Hey, Mikey.”

He lifts an eyebrow and turns to Richie, “Too long without attention?”

“No. Yes, but I want to talk to you about Bill.” Richie leans over the arm of the couch to get closer to him.

“What about him?” Mike is the worst liar and he’s the worst at playing it cool, and he puts his hand against his face like it’s doing shit to hide his grin.

“*What about him*” Richie mimics, “You kissed, you’re going on a date, tell me what happened!” Mike shakes his head, “Oh, look at you. A gentleman never kisses and tells, I can relate.”

Mike laughs with such mirth it’s contagious, “Right, right, right. Don’t talk about the kissing but the blowjob? The getting fingered open?—”

Richie leans up on the armrest, “Ohoho, you two are really getting your chucks. I was *horny*, Mike, let me express myself as I please.” He laughs, “But I didn’t actually tell you about the kissing part, so—” He gestures to himself, “A gentleman.”

“The gentlemanliest.” Beverly nudges against Richie and hands him his coffee. There’s no art. It’s just black coffee in a mug, but he sips it and winks.

“Thank you!” The girl at the mic holds her ukulele aloft and shakes it, “Good luck following this one up, Eddie.” She giggles, a rolling sound and Richie *has* to look up to gander at anyone named Eddie.

He chokes on his coffee and promptly spits whatever is still in his mouth back into the mug.

It’s an Eddie.

His Eddie, in fact.

Also his Stan, steering a mildly reluctant Eddie in front of the microphone and situating an acoustic guitar in his hands. He's nervous and slightly withdrawn, but there's something entirely different about him as well. His hair is messy, styled only by his fingers being pushed through the front of it with nerves, and the usual furrow between his brow is gone. He has never looked more himself in the entire time Richie has known him.

"Eddie Money, Ayyy!" Someone yells and he laughs quietly against the microphone.

"I never usually sing in front of people." He admits quietly, and it's true. He sings in front of his friends— along to the radio in the car and in the shower and if he's showing Beverly a new riff he's been working on. He doesn't sing in front of crowds though. When Richie had asked him why, back when they started their band, Eddie had told him that if he sang up on a stage— with *intention*— that everyone would know him. That they would see the real Eddie Kaspbrak, and how terrifying is that?

"You're in a band!" Someone else yells.

"Yes." Eddie points to them, "But I'm not the singer, because fuck that."

People laugh and Richie feels a massive swell of affection. For this crowd and for Eddie letting people laugh *with* him.

"But he has to sing tonight, because therapy is expensive, and this is a circle of trust." Stan leans over Eddie's shoulder to speak into the microphone and everyone cheers. "So, Eddie, stand up straight, close your eyes, and think about him."

"Do it for Richie!" The girl with the ukulele points at him and Richie is clutching his mug so hard he's afraid that it's going to break under his fingers.

These people are saying his name. They know who is. Eddie has talked about him with this café full of Maine hipsters and college

students with rainbow patches on their backpacks and interlocking hands.

“I think—” Eddie lets his eyes fall closed and he takes a shaky breath, “I mean, I *hope* that maybe this could make me brave.”

There’s an eruption of ‘You’re brave!’, ‘You’re brave as fuck!’, ‘You got this’, and all Richie can do is seek Bev’s hand out on the couch next to him and grip it tightly.

Eddie breathes in deep, and then his fingers are moving over the strings of the guitar.

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

“I think then it would’ve been perfect.” He admits it quietly, a little unnerved by the way Stan keeps staring at him, lips quirked knowingly.

He studies Eddie for a long moment before glancing up at the stage and nodding, “Consider your night made impeccable then.”

“Stan, what—” Eddie glances behind him and it’s the grace of whatever divine being might exist that keeps him upright.

Richie is standing up at the mic.

Richie Tozier.

Richie in his black jeans and his bomber jacket pulled over a checkered shirt.

Richie in his black framed glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose with a nervous laugh and saying, “I know I’m crashing a party here, but hi, nice to meet you all, I’m Richie.”

Notes for the Chapter:

The song Eddie sings is '3 Rounds and a Sound' by Blind Pilot and the song that Richie sings is 'Talk Too Much' by COIN.

The song Eddie and Stan are singing together (because this is the important one) is 'I Got 5 On It' by Luniz

Anyways, this is super sappy, and I only have one

chapter left, but what's the point of writing fic for the Clown Hell if it isn't to make their lives just a little softer?

"I got five on it. Grab your forty, let's get keyed." Eddie drums his fingers against the top of the table, chin tilted up in defiant confidence "I got five on it—"

He points to Stan who shimmies his hips and sings, "Messin' with that Indo' weed."

Their new friends laugh and this is exactly how Eddie sees them now. A group of mostly college kids, spanning the state of Maine, all clustered together in a coffee shop in backwoods Derry. All proudly individual. Shaved heads and piercings, girls who easily lean over and kiss other girls on the lips and then tuck their hair behind their ears. People who share their lives with contagious laughter and easy jokes meant to give them power, not beat them down.

These are people who have known Eddie for only a couple hours—heard his story, even in the way he left some of the spaces blank, and told him 'Fuck that. You're not your parents and you're not this town.'

People who have known Eddie for only a couple hours and dreamily crooned out, 'Richie looooooves you.'

"I know you guys are messing around, but you are a really great singer." Cassie, a college senior with a sleek bob cut and dark red, matte lipstick digs the sprinkles off of her whipped cream and shoves the spoon in her mouth.

"Thank you." Stan says grimly.

Cassie looks up, fake lashes batting heavily, "Not you, you sound like the evil stepsisters in Cinderella."

"Oh, the lament song?" Her fiancé, Lisa sits up excitedly, "The Broadway one?"

Cassie snorts, "No, the one they sing—"

“It’s called the Stepsisters’ Lament, I’m like ninety nine percent sure.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” Cassie groans and their bickering warms Eddie up impossibly more than he already is. It makes him long for Richie to be there so that they could find stupid reasons to just hear each other’s voices. “The movie, Lisa, focus!”

“Sing, Sweet Nightingale.” Eddie says and laughs when Cassie lets out a delighted cry.

“That’s the one!” She snaps her fingers and turns her smug look on Lisa, before kissing her face rapidly. “Anyways, Eddie, you sing like a total dreamboat and you should go up there and sing.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.” Stan says, all matter of fact when he tilts his cold brew up to his face. “Maybe sing about Richie since we’re all out here venting.”

Eddie feels his face start to burn up, but it’s not from shame. Not a shame of what he did with Richie at least. He’s a bit ashamed with how he left it now that his emotions have dialed back from the brink. “I’m not good with—words. Talking, I guess. Maybe I should let you guys write down something for me and I can just read off of a paper.”

“You’re an absolute pro at talking to Richie though. You two do nothing but talk.” Stan reminds him.

“Not about the important shit, apparently.” Sean, a nineteen year old in school to be a welder, tells him.

Stan hums in agreement and Eddie kicks his shoe. “I’m not gonna sing about Richie.”

Their table gets grumbly about it, and Eddie takes a moment to listen to the girl singing about Godzilla up at the mic. “You could sing *too* Richie. Since you said it’s easier for you to express yourself in music, you could just sing something *too* him.” Lisa twists her long blonde hair over her shoulder and levels Eddie with her big blue eyes, “I feel like I definitely know Richie after our evening together, and I definitely think he would get it if you sang *too* him.”

Stan looks way to confident in the way he leans against the table and

taps away at his phone. He's probably filling Patty in on what a great big loser Eddie is being right now. Or maybe not— Patty would probably tell Stan to be nice. "You can sing up here first, think of it as your practice run. And then you'll be all set to have your one on one with Richie. Talk, sing—"

"Fuck!" Cassie says with a thrilled shimmy and Eddie chokes.

"No!" Stan points his finger in warning, "I mean— yeah, after is fine, but don't try to fix this with sex, Kaspbrak. You better use your words."

"Be brave, Eddie." Lisa reaches out and grabs his hand over the top of the table.

Sean grins, sleepy and kind, "Yeah, man, you can do this."

He looks up to the 'stage'— It's actually just a series of pallets that the owner, Danny, has artfully nailed together and treated— and he takes a deep breath. He can be brave. He *is* brave.

A little bit.

Eddie nods. "Yeah," Stan leans forward and asks him "What?" making Eddie laugh and lean away from him, "I said yeah. I'll do it."

Stan pumps his fist into the air and jogs away to the stage to let the barista know that Eddie is going to play next, and Eddie feels sick. Good sick, if that's even a thing.

When they had gotten to the record store, Stan had already spent a better part of their car ride telling Eddie that being human doesn't make him inherently sick. He's not broken or disgusting or giving Richie an AIDS/Cancer/Dengue Fever combo pack by being intimate with him. It had helped some, but it doesn't undo a lifetime of having his biggest fear be himself. Eddie wonders if this was his mothers' intention all along, or if she really was terribly misguided in his entire life.

"So," Sean leans his face against his hand, "What's he look like?"

Eddie looks away from the condensation rolling down the side of his

glass, “What?”

Sean snorts, “Richie. We’ve spent the past hour listening to you talk about him, I’m pretty sure *I’m* in love with him now.” Lisa mutters out an agreement, “Tell us what he looks like, or better yet, show us a picture. I imagine he’s like, James Dean meets Michael B. Jordan levels of hot right now.”

It makes Eddie laugh hard enough that tears start to spring to the corners of his eyes, “Oh, fuck, that’s— God, that’s so inaccurate, Stan’s gonna lose his mind.”

“About what?” Stan already looks amused, eyes shining with excitement to hear what Eddie has to tell him

“They were asking if Richie’s hot.” Eddie thumps his hand against his chest once and attempts to regain his composure as Sean clarifies what he said.

Stan does laugh and he gets his phone out before Eddie can, “Okay, we’re making it seem like Richie is a bridge troll or something, and he’s definitely not. It’s more like— if you know him, it’s difficult to attach the word *hot* to him.”

“He’s ridiculous.” Eddie shakes his head, “He’s like, five inches too tall, and his limbs are too long. Richie’s got this crazy hair that could *probably* be really great if he ever put effort into it. Did you know he didn’t even use conditioner until I moved in with him? He had that shitty 3 in 1 shampoo that middle schoolers use. Don’t even get me started on his clothes, it’s like he threw himself into the donation box at a thrift store and rolled around until his cryptid arms snagged enough fabric. Richie looks so fucking stupid all the time, he only got glasses that actually fit his face six months ago.” Eddie rubs his temple, “He has these eyes that— have you ever met someone with eyes that are just so warm and inviting? Like there’s always a smile behind them, they genuine happiness and you can see it living inside of them because their eyes give it all away? That’s Richie. His smile is so big and contagious and if he takes a second to stop talking shit, his lips are all soft and perfect. He’s just— He’s so—”

They’re gathered around Stan’s phone, looking at a picture no doubt

to go along with Eddie's words and Cassie giggles. It's not cruel, there's no incredulous huff at Eddie thinking that *this* was a sane thing to be attracted to. She lowers the phone and sighs out, "Eddie, he's beautiful."

Eddie takes the phone to see which picture Stan's showed them. It's from a couple months ago. A picture of Richie leaned up on the counter of their apartment, mid laugh at something Bev had shouted from their living room. Eddie can still hear it like they're there in that moment. He can't keep the fondness from his voice when he says, "Yeah, he is."

"Look at the love face." Sean points at him and Eddie has little time to be embarrassed about that because the girl at the microphone is pointing at him and saying, "Good luck following this one up, Eddie." And now he has to contend with the oncoming asthma attack.

Stan is the one who ends up placing him in front of the mic, situating the guitar in his hands and patting his shoulder. "I never usually sing in front of people." He rambles a little, admits that he's scared, which makes him feel— big.

"You got this." Stan whispers in his ear and he's shooting him a thumbs up before taking his place back at the table.

Eddie closes his eyes, breathes in and out a few times. He's never been good with words, at talking about the things that weigh heavy on him, but music? Music he's always been good at. There's an easiness to taking the ache in his heart and putting it on every sweeping major and haunting minor and he can do this. 'Richie would get it' he tells himself, and wishes fiercely that he were here right now.

The notes come out as muscle memory. A song that Eddie's always loved, simple and calming over his acoustic guitar. He keeps his eyes shut through the first verse, thoughts singularly focused. "They're playing our song. They're playing our song. Can you see the light? Can you hear the hum?"

Eddie's voice gets more confident then. The threat of a shake starts to dwindle, and someone whistles. He grins against the mic and opens his eyes. Everyone is watching him, but none of them with disgust.

"I was swimming
My eyes were dark 'til you woke me
And told me that opening is just the start
It was
Now I see you 'til kingdom come you're the one I want
To see me for all the stupid shit I've done"

A loud cheer of agreement and Eddie huffs out a laugh against the microphone, a smile that lingers into the chorus.

"Soil and six feet under
Kept just like we were
Before you knew you'd know me
And you know me
Blooming up from the ground
Three rounds and a sound
Like whispering, "you know me
You know me"

It's easy to finish the song then. He means it, and maybe everyone else can pick up on it then. Eddie wants to run, but not out of fear. He wants to run back to his apartment in Bangor. To tuck himself into Richie's side, and kiss his smiling mouth and draw love on his skin. He wants his best friend and when he trails off the last line, the riff coming to an end, Eddie leans his head against the microphone for a moment, laughing at the comical popping noise it makes over the speakers.

There's applause. Nothing to buckle at the knees over, but flattering for a room of forty people, and Eddie presses a shaking hand to his chest, adrenaline sliding out of his veins. He puts the guitar on the stand, not sticking around to help out whoever's up next, because he wants to sink back into his seat and inhale his coffee.

"I'm gonna throw up." He tells Stan when he slides in next to him.

Stan grabs his hand and squeezes it, "I'm so proud of you, you rocked it."

Eddie lets out a weak smile, "Really?" He's peripherally aware of the rest of the people at his table gushing over his performance but his

stomach is still in knots, "I wish Richie was here."

Stan just hums, a pleasant smile on his face, "Oh yeah?"

"I think then it would've been perfect." He admits it quietly, a little unnerved by the way Stan keeps staring at him, lips quirked knowingly.

He studies Eddie for a long moment before glancing up at the stage and nodding, "Consider your night made impeccable then."

"Stan, what—" Eddie glances behind him and it's the grace of whatever divine being might exist that keeps him upright.

Richie is standing up at the mic.

Richie Tozier.

Richie in his black jeans and his bomber jacket pulled over a checkered shirt.

Richie in his black framed glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose with a nervous laugh and saying, "I know I'm crashing a party here, but hi, nice to meet you all, I'm Richie."

A hush falls over the café, tension thick until Lisa claps her hands together and yells, "Oh my god, Richie!"

The greeting that he gets after that is laughable, like he's some big name celebrity, and Eddie supposes after the night they've all had, he might sort of be. Richie laughs, "Shit, that's exactly the sort of ego boost you guys don't want to be giving me." He looks around and someone yells for him to play a song. Richie shakes his head, "You guys are gonna hate this, I'm just the bassist." He holds his hands up in surrender and his eyes land on Eddie, "Hey, sweetheart." He says it quiet, in that soft, private voice that he only ever uses for Eddie and the crowd 'awww's' in delight.

Eddie's heart is pounding in his chest and he knows he's gaping at Richie like a bit of a loser, but his whole entire world is narrowed down to this. He swallows down the threat of tears, overwhelmed by every emotion trying to exist in him at once and he shakes his head,

unable to stop the smile the tugs at the side of his mouth. “So, um, before I start, I kind of want to add in my own side. Side? Is there sides to this?” Richie drops the strap to the guitar over his shoulder. “I want you to know Eddie the way I do. Well, er— maybe not entirely the way I do.” He makes a face and people laugh, Sean nudging a now red faced Eddie, “I’m sorry, Eds, it’s funny.” Richie smirks.

“It’s not.” Eddie says with no real bite.

“It is!” Richie laughs, “See, that’s my Eddie. That bundle of five foot seven rage and anxiety that is trying so hard not to flip me off right now— oh, there he goes— that’s my best friend, and I’m so—” Richie breathes out, a sigh that has him gripping the top of the microphone with two hands like it’s the only thing keeping him upright for the moment, “I’m so in love with you.”

Eddie is dizzy, his head spinning, and he can’t help it now. Can’t help the quiet hiccup that bubble up out of his chest or the warm sting of tears that he buries his face in his sleeve to get rid of before that can make it further than the tops of his cheeks. He can feel Stan’s arm drape across his back, hear the chatter of endeared people, and he sniffs, looking up at Richie and shaking his head.

“Am I embarrassing you?” Richie asks him and Eddie nods then. Richie laughs, “I’m sorry, but you spent the last two hours saying who the fuck knows about me to these fine North Easterners— you guys are from around here, right? That sucks.” It’s like watching a standup routine, and the café is loving Richie, but Eddie just sees Richie. The way he always is. Loveable and funny and a personality to be reckoned with. “You just played a song for me, with that fuckin’ earnest voice and that—” Richie gestures to his face, “You make me weak, Eddie Kaspbrak. You make me feel fearless, and alive, and better. You make me want to love you the way no one else in your life ever got right. I want to do that, if you’ll let me.”

He’s looking at Eddie with those honest eyes and Eddie finds himself breathing again. “Yeah.” He says it quietly, and nods, “Yeah, I want that.”

There’s a moment where Eddie thinks Richie is going to burst into

tears, his throat working hard, jaw tight and finally he looks up at the ceiling and inhales before turning back to the mic, "Alright, let me put on a show for these people real quick so I can get you home and fuck you through the mattress."

Stan makes an affronted noise and Eddie laughs. Loud and joyful and Richie clears his throat, glancing up at Eddie from under his lashes. "Caffeine, small talk, wait out the plastic weather—"

It's not that romantic of a song, when Eddie really breaks it down, but when Richie is singing about how he talks to much and grins around the 'Honey, come put your lips on mine and shut me up'.

Eddie looks over at Stan, who is conveniently enthralled with Richie in a way he absolutely never is. "Did you know about this? That he would be here." Stan still doesn't look at him when he opens his mouth, "Don't lie." He adds quickly and Stan's gaze drops to the table before bringing it up to Eddie.

"Yeah." He breathes out, "But Richie didn't. To be fair, we didn't plan this when I first picked you up. Bev had texted and then we started—you know—" He makes a complicated hand gesture that Eddie supposes is intended to be 'planning'.

"Wait, Bev?" Eddie looks around then, and Stan points to a couch in the corner, where Bev is curled up against Mike, knees pulled up on the cushions and she waves. Eddie puts his hand up weakly, "How did I not see them?" The corner is fairly tucked away and people have been coming and going all night, so it's not that strange.

"You've been pretty distracted." Stan reminds him. "I thought this would be the easiest way for you to tell him. Sorry?"

He doesn't look sorry at all and Eddie bumps his shoulder into him before looking back at Richie, "He loves me." Saying it out loud makes Eddie feel giddy.

"He does." Bev's voice is low in his ear and she drapes herself over his shoulders, "I'm proud of you."

Mike is talking to him, Bev is adding in her two cents, and they're

starting up with Lisa, Cassie and Sean, but Eddie keeps his eyes on Richie. Richie who loves him. Richie who he loves. He's in the final few lines of his song and Eddie shoves himself out of the chair— can't stand another second where they're not holding each other and he shoves his way up to the stage.

Eddie steps up on the pallet when Richie's brushing out some final chords, and Richie is about to say something— the smart remark poised in the sly curve of his lips, but Eddie doesn't give him the opportunity. He crowds right up against Richie, pressed up on his toes when he wraps his hands around Richie's neck and kisses him.

It's uncomfortable with an entire guitar between them, commentary from the crowd, and Eddie trying not to slip into a crack in the pallet while balancing on his toes. But Richie's mouth is warm and inviting, his tongue brushing delicately against Eddie's when the kiss opens up. Where Eddie had been entirely unmade this morning in his bed, underneath Richie— in this moment he's been put back together, and he kisses Richie one, two, three more times and breathes him in, "I'm so in love with you too."

"Yeah?" Richie asks like he can't believe it, fingers curling gently into the back of Eddie's hair.

Eddie nods his head, "Take me home, Rich."

Richie nearly throws the guitar in his haste to get it off of him, "Alright, you heard him, right?" He looks at the crowd, "He loves me and I have to take him home, so no one reach out to us for three days, we're busy." He holds the guitar up, and a kid who can't be older than fifteen rushes up to grab it from him. He picks Eddie up, something that would have him killed in most other scenarios, but Eddie wraps his legs around Richie's waist and laughs when Richie practically growls into his neck and says, "You fucking nuisance. I'm trying to sing you a song and you're being all hot and saying sexy shit like 'I love you'."

Eddie is high with happiness and he lets Richie carry him outside and deposit him on the sidewalk before crowding Richie against the wall and running his hands over his chest, "Can I tell you something sort of dirty?"

He has his lip drawn between his bottom teeth and Richie groans, “Yeah, of course.”

Eddie leans up, presses his lips to Richie’s ear and whispers, “I love you. I’ve always been in love with you and I know I always will be.”

Richie grips Eddie’s ribs and tickles him roughly, “Don’t be fucking *cute*.”

“I love you.” Eddie says between peals of laughter, because he can. Because it feels like a bandage on his wounded heart, and it feels like safety when Richie kisses the corner of his mouth and asks him like it’s the only music he wants to hear—

“Say it again.”